

TRENDS IN ADULT EDUCATION RESEARCH IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

Kjell Rubenson

University of British Columbia

Abstract

Adult education research in BC has developed as an integral part of the North American network and with a strong commitment to adult education as a field of study. Much of the scholarly production is not supported by grants and a substantial amount of the publications are conceptual in nature. New research topics are emerging in response to economic and social change.

Résumé

La recherche en éducation des adultes en Colombie Britannique s'intègre dans le réseau de l'Amérique du Nord et est solidement engagée à l'égard de l'éducation des adultes comme champ d'études. Une importante partie de la production scientifique n'est pas supportée par des subventions et une portion substantielle des publications sont de nature conceptuelle. Enfin, de nouveaux objets de recherche émergent en réponse au changement économique et social.

Introduction

To give a representative and in-depth picture of adult education research in British Columbia (BC) without undertaking a major study is not possible. Thus the presentation will be limited to some broad general observations on the status of adult education research in the province and the factors that are influencing the developments.

In this review, adult education research has been conceptualized narrowly, referring to research carried out by adult education faculty and units or both. This is not to deny that other academic units within the universities may be involved in research that is highly relevant to the field of adult education. The decision to concentrate on the academy is based on the fact that with the exception of government, little research is being carried on outside universities.

The analysis builds on information collected from the three universities in the province, Simon Fraser University (SFU), the University of British Columbia (UBC), the University of Victoria and the Open University. Most of the focus has been on UBC as it is the only institution that has a major program in adult education. The data consist of curriculum vitae's from adult education faculty, theses, and dissertations, and in some cases annual reports. Further relevant provincial reports have been analyzed with regard to the use of adult education research.

The research that is being produced reflects, among other things, institutional arrangements, a view of adult education as a field of study, and availability of research funds. The analysis starts with a brief presentation of this broader context.

The BC Context

Institutional Arrangement

UBC has one of the main programs in Adult Education in Canada and North America offering masters and doctoral programs and with a major responsibility for research in adult education. Presently there are **six** faculty members, a reduction from a high of **eight**, 40 active doctoral students, and 120 master students. The program is located within the Department of Educational Studies in the Faculty of Education. UBC also has an organization for Continuing Studies whose director, traditionally, was involved in adult education research.

The University of Victoria does not have a formal program in adult education. However, both the Division of Continuing Studies and the Faculty of Education have a long tradition of being involved in academic adult education research and offering special graduate courses in this area. This is also true, but to a somewhat lesser extent, of SFU.

The Open Learning Agency (OLA) differs from the three traditional universities in that the research activities are much more an integral part of the organization's operation and to a lesser degree directed by the intrinsic interests of faculty members. Thus, OLA has a special Research Office whose mandate it is to conduct research that helps in developing policy and strategy for the Agency and to develop "accountability measures." The agency also provides facilities, supervision, and access to data for graduate students in other universities as well as participating in collaborative distance education research projects with other universities.

Disciplinary Tradition

Adult education research in BC has developed as an integral part of the North American network. Thus, faculty and students, particularly from UBC, have traditionally had strong links with their United States' counterparts and played a leading role at meetings like the Adult Education Research Conference (AERC), and the Commission of Professors of Adult Education as well as being eager contributors to *Adult Education Quarterly*. Within this tradition, there is a strong commitment to developing adult education as a recognizable field of study. This is connected with an emphasis on (a) increasing the professional status of the practice of adult education, and (b) the legitimation of adult education within the university community.

The process by which adult education has become a specialized field of study has been linked to the professionalization of adult education. What has occurred is a "scientification" of traditional practitioner vocations which have until recently managed quite well without research connection or "basis" in science (Rubenson, 1994). The accumulation of knowledge within this tradition has been based almost solely on efforts to improve the practice of adult education. Jensen (1964) reflects the pervasive conception of the territory when he argues that adult education is a practical discipline. Its ultimate goal is to give to adult education practitioners better control over factors associated with the problems they face. Knox, reviewing the situation 20 years after Jensen's commentary, reflects the same ethos when he states

“one major reason for adult education research is to produce findings the practitioner can use to improve practice.” (1985, p. 183) Consequently, changes in the practices of adult education can be expected to have consequences for the disciplinary orientation of adult education.

Financing

The availability of research funds and the terms connected with them have a profound impact on what kind of research gets produced, particularly the balance between, on the one hand, resources for “free” basic research, and on the other hand, applied contract research or institutional research.

Basic research. The review of curriculum vitae and scholarly production show that much of the scholarly production is not supported by any research grants but is done by graduate students or by faculty without external support. Further, a scarcity of grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), the most prestigious Canadian source for scholarly research, is evident. This can be seen as the combined effect of the kind of research that is being carried out within adult education units and the attitude in the academic community towards adult education as a field of study. It also reflects the almost universal debate in adult education circles regarding the relevance of traditional academic research and criteria of scholarship for adult education.

As Thomas (1987) points out, the creation of departments of adult education, usually at the graduate level, has resulted in an uneasy mixture of technical and “academic” courses and in a division of faculty members between those preoccupied with conventional scholarship and those concentrating on building a profession. Further, there has been a tension between the dominant university values of scholarship and the direction of the adult education departments. Those within adult education research that promote the traditional scholarly values often have their backgrounds in other disciplines and have entered into adult education through the research of a specific adult education phenomenon. However, a large segment of the faculty members in university departments of adult education has been recruited on grounds of considerable experience within the field. This group questions the narrow definition of traditional scholarship. Their view is that adult education programs ought to be seen as professional schools with a knowledge base different from what can be found in disciplinary departments.

Policy research. Policy research in adult education explores, in a normative and prescriptive mode, the concepts of policy formulation, implementation and evaluation, across systems and institutions. It addresses particular policy initiatives and analyzes the strategy of planned change and the nature and sources of resistance to it. Niece (1992) argues that there are three critical value components characterizing useful policy research, (a) a commitment to issue management, (b) a desire to stimulate perceptual change, and, (c) a drive to obtain predictable and structural research outputs.

One important reason for the emphasis on policy-oriented research is the belief that it can be directly applied to policy decisions and practice. According to this view, adult educational policy research should, among other things:

- give rise to new organizational models
- give rise to administrative rules and routines
- influence the curriculum
- introduce new instructional methods
- create new teaching aids

During the late 1970s and early 1980s the BC Ministry of Education provided substantial financial support to the academic community for policy research, particularly in the areas of curriculum, instructional methods, and teaching aids. However, during the financial restraint period these resources were cut and today only a very small amount finds its way into the research community. It is worth noting that the situation is considerably better for the K-12 system where there exists a well developed program for this kind of policy research. Recently this has been complemented with some direct funding to the universities for supporting graduate students who are doing research that is seen as being particularly relevant to the school system.

The policy research that has, and is being funded, is of an instrumental character and is usually not intended to contribute to generalizable knowledge. However, this is not the case for what has been called "fundamentally oriented policy research." The role of this kind of policy research is not primarily seen as coming up with a solution or answer to a specific issue or both, but rather to help develop a broader understanding of the underlying problem. This involves widening the debate, reformulating the problem, clarifying goals, and analyzing eventual conflicts between multiple goals. Instead of being of direct instrumental use, the primary function of research is conceptual. What distinguishes this kind of policy-oriented research from "free" or basic research is not its theoretical sophistication or contribution to theory but how it has been initiated. As an example we can point to the difference in Canada between the strategic and the regular SSHRCC research grants. The only available funding in BC for this kind of research comes from SSHRCC's strategic program, as nothing equivalent exists on the provincial level. It is worth noting that the present SSHRCC funding held by adult education researchers in the province primarily comes from two strategic programs, work and education, and women and work.

In summary, the review suggests that in comparison to educational research in general, there is a marked under funding of adult education. The combined effects of an unwillingness or inability to compete for SSHRCC funds and a scarcity of resources for policy research, particularly "fundamentally oriented policy research" seriously restricts the possibility to carry out any major empirical research projects.

Areas of Research

The institutional context is reflected in the areas of research. The OLA as well as the University of Victoria are primarily involved in research on various aspects of distance education and open learning. Taken together the two institutions have produced a substantial body of knowledge on this topic. Most of this research has been of an applied nature and closely linked to the institutions' teaching activities.

The scholarly activities among faculty and students at the UBC Adult Education program are best characterized by referring to the diversity of the scholarly production.

The main areas of faculty research can be characterized by the following topics:

- program planning, implementation and administration
- conceptions of learning and teaching
- the role of non formal adult education
- work, adult education and training
- history of Canadian adult education
- philosophy of adult education
- gerontology
- gender issues
- social movements
- adult education democracy and social change
- epistemological and methodological issues in adult education

The purpose of most of the published studies is to contribute to the general knowledge in a respective area. A substantial amount of the publications are conceptual in nature and do not have an empirical part. The strong commitment to adult education as a field of study can be seen in the fact that almost all scholarly articles are published in North American and European adult education journals.

Students' theses and dissertations broadly reflect the faculty profile. However there are a couple of noticeable differences. The international composition of the student body is reflected in a stronger emphasis on international and comparative adult education. The fact that several students bring a research problem with them from their work context results in more emphasis on particular institutions and less on more pure epistemological issues.

Trends

Turning to trends, the first noticeable change is in the gender balance among graduate students. Since the early 1970s there has been a constant increase in the proportion of women. In the first half of the 1980s women were responsible for 67% of all theses and dissertations written. By the 1990s this figure had reached 83%. There has been a paradigmatic shift away from the empiricist tradition to more work

being done within interpretivist perspectives and a growing influence of the post-modernity debate. Despite a general interest in critical theory, it is difficult to find studies by students or faculty that have actually followed this paradigm.

Looking at research topics, there are some new interests emerging. The development towards an information economy, where international competitiveness and employability increasingly are seen as linked to an effective utilization of competencies, learning and knowledge, has resulted in increased interests among students and faculty to address learning and the world of work. The increased awareness of gender biases is also generating substantial research activities in the adult education community. With some very rare exceptions, most of the studies have been done by individual faculty members or students. This reflects the lack of any major funding that would encourage the creation of viable research groups.

Conclusion

Despite continuing advancement in the study of adult education the graduate program in BC is somewhat threatened by the academic establishment for lack of scholarly sophistication, while, at the same time, the practitioners and policy makers are somewhat doubtful of the usefulness of the research. In order to meet these challenges there is a need for more long term research programs, integration of empirical studies and theory development, and a willingness and capability to attack "real problems."

References

- Jensen, G. (1964). How adult education borrows and reformulates knowledge of other disciplines. In G. Jensen, A.A. Liveright, & W. Hallenbeck (Eds.), *Adult education--outlines of an emerging field of university study*. Washington D.C.: AAE.
- Knox, A. (1985). Adult education research: United States. In T. Husén & T.N. Postlethwaite (Eds.), *International encyclopedia of education, 1*, 181-184. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- Niece, D. (1992). *Empirical research and public policy: The literacy file*. Ottawa: Secretary of State.
- Rubenson, K. (1994). Adult education: Disciplinary orientations. In T. Husén & N.T. Postlethwaite (Eds.), *International encyclopedia of education, 1* (2nd ed., 120-127). Oxford: Pergamon.
- Thomas A. (1987). Academic adult education. *The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education, 1*(1), 51-58.