

ADULT EDUCATION RESEARCH IN CANADA A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

Alan M. Thomas

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education [OISE]

University of Toronto

Abstract

Trends in adult education in Canada seem characterized by individual, regional, relatively small scale projects, reported mostly from academic sources. A very encouraging aspect of those sources is the substantial amount of student work reported. Qualitative methodology seems generally accepted, with its former "marginal" status occupied by "participatory research." The absence of large-scale projects reported and substantial government funding may explain why the reported research shows little sign of being "skewed" in the direction of highly visible public preoccupations. It may be, however, that many of these apparently dominant characteristics reflect the emergence of a new research paradigm for which "learning" rather than "education" is the basis.

Résumé

La recherche en éducation des adultes au Canada semble caractérisée par une tendance vers les projets individuels, régionaux, de faible envergure, en général issus du monde universitaire. En revanche, le volume substantiel de productions étudiantes représente l'un des aspects les plus encourageants. Les méthodes qualitatives semblent généralement acceptées, le créneau de la «marginalité» étant maintenant occupé par la recherche de type «participative». L'absence de projets à grand déploiement, de subventions gouvernementales substantielles, pourrait expliquer que la recherche soit peu affectée par des thèmes dominants à haute visibilité. Il se pourrait, par ailleurs, que ces caractéristiques en apparence prépondérantes reflètent l'émergence d'un nouveau paradigme mettant davantage l'accent sur l'acte d'apprendre plutôt que sur la notion d'«éducation».

Research about research about res.... We nearly make it to the third power, but not quite. Still the exploration is valuable and interesting. The fact that research itself is a highly stylized, very highly institutionalized form of learning, gives a special significance to the self-consciousness of adult educators with respect to research in their field. Or it ought to.

The occasion for this self-analysis was the preparation for the *International Seminar on Research Trends in Adult Education*. This reflection is based on the papers prepared in Canada including a draft of the overview prepared by the Institut canadien d'éducation des adultes [ICAE] and the Canadian Association for Adult Education [CAAE] (1994). It should be emphasized that this is a personal reflection, and in no way is it intended to replace the official overview. Perhaps it should also be acknowledged that the author's career has included a mixture of

experience in the field and academic life—both devoted to adult education. This has produced a particular view about the function of research which seems to be reflected to an extent in the documents explored.

A substantive review of this kind, which probably ought to be undertaken at regular intervals, with or without external stimulation, prompts interesting, if painful questions. The basis for UNESCO's interest, as for ours, presumably is that the education of adults under such rubrics as "training," "human resource development," "life-long education," or just plain "learning," is close to the top of every public and private collective agenda in the world. Judging from participation data, scarce, irregular, and fragmented as they are, it is on a great many individual agendas as well. Against that background of political and economic power, and individual concern, what evidence is there of commensurate support for thinking and acting clearly and systematically with respect to the required decisions? More specifically what evidence is there of such support in Canada?

Considering the Canadian evidence therefore prompts such first level questions as: how much research is being done; what are its subjects; how is it distributed across Canada; how is it funded? A second level of question is: who is it being done by; who is paying for it: does the source, either of the research itself, or of funding, bias the questions pursued; who reads it or acts on it? A final set of questions is: is there enough research being done; does it stem from the right sources; is it exploring the right questions; are the funds sufficient?

The first and second level questions were, by and large, taken up by all of the authors of the various papers. Distinct regional and institutional differences can be observed in the reported answers to the first level questions. Sharp ideological differences are to be found, mostly irrespective of region, with respect to the second level. In the case of the third level the questions contribute little to the possible answer, though the international context in which the Canadian responses appear at least provide some comparative basis for establishing a nucleus for responding. This is what Duke (1994) does in his extremely useful review of all the papers.

The first quality to be noticed in the Canadian papers is a particular diffidence with respect to the accuracy and inclusiveness of the reports. Almost all authors found it necessary to define adult education, and in some cases research, while at the same time acknowledging that no single report, within the time given for the enquiry, could possibly identify all the relevant research in adult education taking place in Canada. They pointed to the variety of agencies conducting research that is probably relevant to adult education, including a variety of "types" of agencies, that could be, with reasonable assurance, classified as devoted to adult education; for example the array of government agencies concerned with training and human resource development which have in recent years engaged in substantial national studies. In addition most authors pointed to whole other fields of endeavour such as, "health," where, under the rubric of "health promotion," a great deal of research relevant, at least, to adult learning has been and is being conducted. A similar sense of inadequacy was reflected in the reports from other world regions. What most of the Canadian authors did was to settle for the more evident and familiar

sources, which to a degree means accepting that research in adult education is what self-identified adult educators do. In addition, while some attempts were made to enlist non-university participants, notably in Quebec and Saskatchewan in gathering the information the bulk of what is reported is research undertaken by academics and their students, a practical, but hardly satisfactory, solution.

Despite the ubiquity of the education of adults, some way must be found, and a global way at that, to ensure that relevant research being undertaken by interests with much larger budgets for research—health, the environment, for example—than adult education is ever likely to command, finds its way into the shared enquiry into adult learning, so that mutual nourishment is possible.

As various methodologies being practised in adult education research were reported, so the enquiry about research itself illustrated considerable variety. From the essentially individual (library) reports of British Columbia and Ontario, through the more collective, composite variety of the Maritime Provinces, to the highly collective, systematic reports from Saskatchewan and Quebec, involving a form of “participative research,” even quantitative data was provided. The latter information, available in the individual reports is of considerable value in reflecting trends in both the characteristics of the researchers (faculty and students) and in interests pursued.

A similar difficulty presents itself with respect to classification of subjects. While one can find a reasonable concurrence in the categories used for classifying topics across the regions within Canada, there is a contrast between whether they are classified by substantive category, such as literacy, or by institutional category, occupational training, or by purpose, such as evaluation. The different uses make it difficult to make any comparisons within Canada, and even more difficult internationally. It does not appear that “data banks,” such as ERIC, with their standardized categories and cues have much influenced our classifications. While the individualism, perhaps the regionalism, is appreciated, it lessens the potential for effective comparisons, and perhaps more so, for cumulative development so prized in other research traditions. While it is unlikely, some value might be found in experimenting with the categories developed some years ago by Roger deCrow, and recently updated by Thomas Lifvendahl (deCrow and Lifvendahl, 1995).

Still, one can develop a rough summary of the topics addressed by Canadian researchers, in order of emphasis, and generally on a national basis. They are, teaching and learning, program development and evaluation, participation, policy studies, and historical and philosophical issues. Obviously the categories are not really discrete, and there is variance even over the past six to ten years. For example, participation studies of an inclusive nature have declined in frequency, being replaced by more specific studies of participation in various areas by various populations. It appears that our need to demonstrate that adults as adults do participate in education in substantial numbers has properly declined in contrast to interest in specific sectors of the population participating in specific programs, and to a limited degree, with what results. In some respects these can be

considered "participation" studies, while in the sense of public policy they serve in the longer term as "evaluation" studies.

An additional outcome of the general acceptance of the fact that adults do learn things, and the things they learn (or do not learn) are of both individual and collective importance, is reflected in the appearance of "ideological" divisions in the research. These divisions seem to be reflected in all the regional reports. The Saskatchewan paper puts it most forthrightly:

Among faculty the two broad views about the functions of adult education, as an instrument for social change or a broad education system with multiple functions in society, including responding to provincial economic priorities, have become a basis for defining differences in research priority and legitimacy. Adult education research in Saskatchewan appears increasingly to be a site of ideological contestation.... (see Blunt)

These new perspectives include feminism, antiracism, concerns for equity in terms of culture, origin, and socioeconomic background. While these new concerns seem, at least for the time being to have eclipsed the earlier concerns for class, with its Marxist roots, concerns found in the influential works of Friere and Habermas, for example, the problem of "inclusiveness" of academic departments, as the Saskatchewan report suggests remains, and perhaps will be the major academic problem of the next decade. Evidence of such conflicts can be found in the international reports, although, as in the Canadian materials, there is no indication of open debate of that issue. One of the ironies of the "contestation" is that the reports suggest that what might be called "normative" research conducted on various characteristics of government sponsored "training" programs, provides firmer foundations for the "social change" approach by indicating repeatedly that efforts to enlist more and more adults in various occupational training programs, instead of resulting in greater equity, seem to reinforce the status quo (see Blais; MacKeracher, Chapman & Gillen; and Rubenson).

The conventional wisdom affirms that funding, and the agenda of the funders, in these cases almost exclusively government, drive the identification and pursuit of enquiry, and the selection of objectives. Further the suspicion has been that the omnipresent preoccupation of government with economic agendas and the related functions of occupational training would have had precisely that effect on research in adult education in Canada. The evidence supplied by the Canadian papers, and noted by the authors, does not lend much support for that position. While there is evidence of substantial projects supported by official sponsors, projects devoted to aspects of human resource development, literacy, and language issues, and training evaluations, all topics high on political agendas, these topics do not seem to have dominated the total research output to the extent suspected. Perhaps because so much research is conducted individually, and with modest, if not meagre resources, by both academics and students, the influence of the "big spenders" is not all that apparent. Topics do not seem to have been crowded towards the essentially "economic" agendas of governments and other funding sources.

In fact, what appears to have been happening is that these funders tend to carry out this kind of research themselves by means of the research resources of official committees, task forces, commissions, and the like (ICAE & CAEE, 1994). It is likely that many of the academics, and students as well, provide some form of consultation to such bodies which does not appear as official "research." The evidence of participation in such bodies provided by the Ontario and Quebec reports give credence to that likelihood.

The obverse of that practice is, of course, the tiny amount of money, by any standards, that seems to have been offered to faculties for research purposes, a fact most evident in the plaintive musical metaphor provided by the Atlantic Canada report. In addition, it can, and to a degree does, promote the feeling of irrelevance of the university programs and people to the new, predominant concerns of the State in adult education. The latter outlook was patently apparent at the Symposium for which these papers were prepared, and in a spirited debate over "marginality," that took place on the Canadian Electronic Adult Education Network (LISTSERV@UREGINA1.UREGINA.CA, 1994) in the Spring of 1994. In the latter case the argument of marginality was addressed not only to the research concerns of departments, but to the direction of teaching as well. The sense conveyed by all these threads of self-doubt is not so much being behind or ahead of one's times as being beside them.

In this respect, several of the reports, particularly Atlantic Canada and Saskatchewan, suggest that the result of the public concern for adult education, in whatever form it appears, is making itself felt more in pressure for more teaching, than in pressure for research. That conclusion is supported by the increasing incidence of new undergraduate programs in adult education, as well, perhaps, by evidence of the "assimilation" of existing graduate programs into surrounding programs of educational studies. Perhaps since of all the bodies engaged in research, the university faculties are the only ones that offer instruction as well, there is some unplanned logic in these developments.

There is a price being paid, however, for the relative independence illustrated in the information at hand. The second major impression conveyed by the reports, after the sense of diffidence, is the "parochialism" of the research endeavours. There are no "national," or even large-scale "regional" research projects reported. While there are commonalities in focus and interest to be found, these seem to be more the result of the annual CASAE meetings, and the *Journal*, than of joint efforts at research. The most serious outcome is, of course, the clear separation between research conducted in Quebec and in the rest of Canada. Minimal translation of the outcomes, in either direction, still seems to be the case. Yet, comparisons between the reports from the other regions, even in the form of the reports themselves, points to the fact that there seems to be, so far, no "common market" of research in adult education in Canada. The historic provincial exclusiveness associated with the education of children and young people in Canada does not seem to be being overcome by adult education despite the different character, in terms of citizenship and mobility, of the populations we try

to serve. An irony, already referred to, is that the major national and regional studies associated with adult learning seem to be being undertaken in other areas such as health, environmentalism, and to a minor extent occupational training. That in itself reinforces the need to find a way for greater exchange of results, perspectives, and experience between these fields.

One might observe that the geographical, if not entirely the intellectual, parochialism illustrated in the Canadian reports is in some contrast to evidence of regional and international research projects reported by other parts of the world, most notably in Latin America (Roldan, 1994). Perhaps one of the impacts of NAFTA will be to influence us in research directions familiar to Mexican adult educators. There are some signs that the foundations for such reciprocal influence are already being laid in the environmental movements, and perhaps by the popular adult educators.

One of the most notable aspects of the Canadian, compared to most of the international, reports is the emphasis placed on student research. The general maturity and experience of graduate students in adult education in Canada means that the topics and methods chosen, and the results, perhaps need to be taken more seriously than the work of younger less experienced graduate students in some other fields. There are some interesting suggestive patterns. The increase in the number of female students, and the commensurate increase in research undertaken by them, provokes questions of comparative gender sensibilities that are yet to be addressed. The Saskatchewan report destroys one illusion, if it really existed, in reporting that women students have completed more "quantitative" studies than have men, though overall, the preference of the majority of students is for "qualitative" studies. But, what is more interesting is the fact that the students choices do not seem to mirror the preoccupations of faculty. Obviously the maturity and experience of the students has a great deal to do with this apparent "dissonance." The latter presents an interesting contrast to the attitude encountered frequently among outsiders to our academic world, an attitude that we have at our command a large body of able, intellectual, "workers," who can be assigned research topics of our, and their—the outsiders—choosing. In fact, the discourse engendered by these contrasting, if not competing interests, of faculty and students, is one of the most stimulating and satisfying aspects of our work.

However, welcoming the form of the exchange does not absolve us from being responsive to the content. What is there to learn from the differences? The students, coming from the "trenches" are, presumably, reflecting the dominant preoccupations of those fields of endeavour. The concentration of student work on areas of program development, analysis, and evaluation, reflected in the reports, seems to reinforce that conclusion. What are the sources of faculty interests that produce these differences? More important, perhaps, is what ought to be the relationship between faculty and student interests, and between faculty and student research? The historic model drawn from other areas of graduate study that students complete their programs of study by involving themselves in research projects, or at least research themes determined by faculty is not

apparent in academic research in adult education—or at least is not superficially apparent. Should it be? Are we here facing a so far unarticulated conflict between the demands of cumulative, consistent, research, and the educational needs, if not demands, of the students? Is it possible that our interpretation of our commitment to self-determination on the part of the students/learners is in direct conflict with the conventional demands of research? However that issue is or can be resolved, our concerns about “marginalization” should compel us to be constantly aware of, and in some way responsive to, the substance of these differences of concern.

The reports comment in some detail on the range of methodologies illustrated by the enquiries. There seem to be if not many, then several, flowers blooming, from the strict quantitative, statistical approaches, through the predominant qualitative, to the steady emergence of “participative” research. As seems always the case in these developments, the most recent arrival, participative research, now enjoys the scepticism about whether it is proper research, that was enjoyed by qualitative research a few years ago, and in some quarters still is. If one were to acknowledge a clear trend, it is the general acceptance in all of these reports, and generally, internationally, of the legitimacy of the qualitative method(s). The hard edge of these developments is, of course, the seeking of legitimacy in terms of the quest for academic tenure and promotion, which in turn means seeking and getting acceptance outside of adult education, often outside of education itself. The short-lived ascendancy enjoyed by Education forty years ago, an ascendancy that gave rise to most of the academic programs in Adult Education, indeed, to agencies like OISE, provided the opportunity for the more rapid proliferation of these methods and practices than might have been the case. That period now seems over, perhaps symbolized by the end of the independence of OISE, but more relentlessly, by the erosion of the independence of all graduate departments. The battle over the legitimacy of various methodologies is likely to grow more intense. In the short and long run, the real issue is not whose temperament and history is best served, but what methods help us move the understanding and practice of adult education, indeed of all education, forward. The reports do not reflect a great deal of self-consciousness about methodology and perhaps that, as much as anything else, needs to change. Participative research, which seems to offer a genuine convergence of traditional research and a concern for learning perhaps needs more open discussion, and comparative testing than it seems to have received.

There is a curious bias to be noted in the Canadian reports, which, with one exception, is the absence of reference to books published by Canadian adult educators. Three come immediately to mind; Selman and Dampier, *The Foundations of Adult Education in Canada* (1991); Tough, *Crucial Questions about the Future* (1991); and Thomas, *Beyond Education: New Perspectives on the Management of Learning in Society* (1990). There may well be others. While the uncertainties about the nature of research may have inclined the authors of the reports to include only articles in refereed journals, a good deal is lost by excluding single- or perhaps double-authored books. They are, after all, based on research, and in most cases have enjoyed at least as rigorous an evaluation as any journal

article. But more important they present a consistent, larger perspective that is possible by single authors, and reflect more tellingly some major directions in which all of the accumulating research is going. For example the Thomas book reflects the favouring of "the unveiling of learning over the teaching methodology," (Roldan, 1994), while Selman and Dampier provide a general context for the education of adults in Canada that informs a great deal of what is being accomplished in other research.

The final set of questions remain. Is enough research done? Does what is done have any impact? Are our uncertainties about marginality accurate? Neither the Canadian nor International documents provide much assistance in addressing these questions, if, indeed, they are the right questions.

One might conclude that the picture presented, allowing the choices made about what will or could be reported, is a picture of limited accomplishment by a relatively small number of able and committed people. This, of course, is in comparison to the public rhetoric about learning and adult education, and the public and private agendas.

One interesting omission from the reports is any reflection of what sort of research ought to be done. Information about projects planned, or large proposals so far unfunded, would have been useful and interesting. In addition, we cannot expect the external authorities to know what sort of research ought to be done unless we provide some leadership.

However, underlying most of the reports, and indeed this commentary, is another set of suppositions, suppositions that give rise to comparisons, and conclusions about the value and extent of what we do. Perhaps because most of the authors are academics, though not exclusively so, there is a certain nostalgia, a longing for the weight and respectability that we see in other groups, such as economists, and to a lesser extent, sociologists and political scientists. Perish any thought that we should aspire to the prominence of a whole pantheon of natural scientists.

Is it possible therefore that we are pursuing the wrong model; that the portrait presented by these enquiries is not one of a slow, a too slow, ascent to conventional power and respectability, but on the contrary, the portrait of the emergence of a different research paradigm? However much the practice of the education of adults may resemble, may try to resemble, other social and political undertakings, it is more directly and self-consciously based on learning than any of the others. That foundation on so fundamental and human a characteristic is certainly responsible for some of the variations from conventional patterns that the reports so clearly witness. It is responsible, surely, for our inability to "own" adult education research in the way that other specializations seem to be able to do; for the proliferation of language and terminology that makes consistency and comparison so difficult, and perhaps for the apparent necessity of reinventing wheels, both concurrently and consecutively. It may be that the understanding of learning, which involves engaging in what we are at the same time studying, does not lend

itself to the cumulative patterns so treasured in other venues and traditions of research. So far as we know, learning itself does not proceed in a straight line; the fashionable "learning curve" is not an individual experience, but a statistical phenomenon. Therefore, our and anyone else's learning about learning is not likely to exhibit the patterns of other more formal methods of learning about other kinds of phenomena.

If this is true then we are entitled to bring another, more open-ended, incremental, model to bear in evaluating our own work.

This can mean that the authors of the various reports are quite right to begin by offering both their definitions of research and of adult education, thereby acknowledging that such definitions, while offering intelligibility to their reports, also acknowledge the possibility of other, alternative, definitions that might allow greater understanding in the future. They were also right in examining, rather than taking for granted, who did the research, and what else they did other than simply do research, publish in admittedly limited outlets, and teach students. And, right in taking the research of students, independent of the faculty, with the greatest seriousness. Coming from, and returning to, so many dispensations, contradicting the specialization of so many other fields of study and practice, these students in themselves are the primary channels for the impact not only of research, but of teaching. In all the discussions of marginality that fact is most often ignored.

What *all* the reports reflected are activities involving the simultaneous exchange of research (research not limited formally to adult education in the way of most of the reports), teaching, and action in the community (by a variety of people with a variety of developed experience in a variety of fields, of a both concurrent and consecutive character), by means of a great variety of social and political instruments. Chaos Theory, with its acknowledgement of the importance of beginnings, and of the likelihood of patterns repeating themselves, with significant alterations, is a much better model for understanding and developing our research than the predominant models from other research traditions. A true understanding of these reports provides enormous encouragement for us to affirm the genuine novelty and centrality of the understanding of learning in all of its poignant mysteries. It is a forgivable arrogance, perhaps, to argue that Descartes would have been closer to the truth to argue, "I learn, therefore I am!" That is precisely the dimension of the challenge facing us.

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