

## Perspectives

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### ACADEMIC ADULT EDUCATION

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It ought not to be news to practicing adult educators, university and otherwise, that the academic arms of adult education are in trouble. While relationships between the academic adult educators and the practitioners have been uneven, to say the least, nevertheless what happens to any other area of "adult education" must be of interest, if not concern, to all other areas.

It was in 1958 that the first full-time Masters program in adult education in Canada was created at the University of British Columbia. Prior to that there had been courses in adult education offered at various Canadian universities for professional educators pursuing graduate degrees in education. Following that development, full programs appeared at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, the University of Montreal, the University of Saskatchewan, and St. Francis Xavier University. Other universities have offered work in this area, providing for the growing number of individuals who found themselves in positions requiring some "expertise" with respect to adults engaged in learning. Two characteristics have dominated the very rapid growth of the provision of opportunities for individuals to study adult education in Canadian universities since 1958. First, the programs of study have been offered at the graduate level; second, almost all of the students have been older than the average graduate student, largely because they had been employed in the practice of adult education before they sought the opportunity to improve their skills and understanding. While this circumstance reflected the rapidly increasing participation by adults in education throughout the 1960's, 70's and 80's, it also reflected the characteristic pattern of the adult learner, who seeks learning as a result of current challenges and problems, rather than as preparation.

Both of these aspects have presented an endemic problem for graduate departments of adult education. They have been caught between the demands of being vehicles of graduate study with an emphasis on pure research and proper contribution to learned journals, and being professional schools with an emphasis on practice and contributions to policy development. As long as the "palmy days" of almost unlimited public financial support for universities continued in Canada, the ambiguities were tolerable, but when those days ended and universities were forced to reassess their roles and function, the tolerance disappeared.

There is some considerable irony in these developments. While financial support for universities has declined, and the contribution to the public

well-being of their two functions, teaching and research in all areas, has been questioned (at all levels, both inside and outside of the formal educational system) even in the face of higher fees and restricted access, adult participation in education has grown rapidly. Where this has been the case in other areas of university interests and contributions, say, in computer applications, resources have been made available and departments have been created, but not in adult education.

Most academic departments of adult education have been intellectual sports (in the biological sense of the word) of the academic environment in which they were created. At O.I.S.E., for example, there were originally ten departments of academic specialization. Nine of those departments, including Curriculum, Applied Psychology, Sociology, History and Philosophy, Special Education, Computer Applications, Measurement and Evaluation, Educational Administration and Educational Planning, were devoted to the education of children and young people. The tenth, Adult Education, was defined in terms of a totally different and, now, larger population—adult students/learners—and was expected to cope, for that population, with all of the specializations represented by all of the other departments. In short, it was expected to be able to reflect, for its students, the history, philosophy, sociology, curriculum development, special education, psychology, and so on, of the education of adults. As long as the education of adults was perceived to be a remedial enterprise, dealing with those small numbers who had somehow failed the opportunities provided for all Canadian children, the ironies of distribution of responsibility went unnoticed, except by adult educators.

Recently, all this has changed. Study after study in Canada and elsewhere in the industrial world has indicated that the population of adults engaged in formal education, presumably needing the skills of graduates of departments of adult education, is not composed of the failures of the formal system, but its successes. In addition, those same studies have indicated that there are increasing numbers, whom the formal system has failed and who cannot survive equitably in Canadian society unless they, as adults, have access to educational opportunity which they, as adults, understand. No democratic society, which genuinely wishes to survive as a democratic society, can afford to ignore these citizens.

Adult education has come of age. The consequences of this development are now making themselves felt on the academic departments.

There are two separate consequences. The first is that the dominant institutions of Canadian society, indeed of all industrial societies, the big battalions, have discovered the potential of adult education. Business, health, the military, and the clergy, have discovered that they cannot survive without taking seriously the learning of their employees, clients, patients, and/or members. Having discovered this, they are not likely to leave the development of educational support systems for adults to the existing academic departments of adult education. In short, adult education is much too important to be left to adult educators. Already it

is clear that these various institutions are developing training and educational programs, at least to the "masters" level, for adult educators who will function within them. The likelihood is that the existing departments will lose their most influential and best endowed students in masters level programs over the next few years. They will attract a few back for doctoral work, and in those cases the ideological problems will be very stimulating. What will be lost will be a unifying idea which the common academic experience of all adult educators who have sought academic education has provided up until now, the idea that it is the adult learner who is at the center of the enterprise of adult education. It is a subtle idea, and a subtle relationship, difficult to maintain between teacher and learner under any circumstances, and in any context. But as teachers of adults are, in increasing numbers, trained in specific institutional contexts, interests of those institutions are likely to be unquestioned.

The second consequence is one to which academic adult educators are more vulnerable, since it comes from within the academic establishment itself. For thirty years, academic adult educators have worked, mostly, in an atmosphere of benign neglect from their colleagues, to establish adult education as a respectable field of study and teaching. They have not much minded, in fact they have enjoyed, incorporating all the other specializations in their work because they have been convinced that when you alter the educational equation by substituting an adult for a child, everything else in that equation changes. There has been a lot of genuine learning taking place, among professors and students alike, the kind of learning that universities are supposed to foster, and do, but rarely.

This preoccupation has blinded most of the academic adult educators to some other developments. For instance, Canada, and the professional educational faculties, are running out of children. Fewer children, despite the arguments for increased resources for them and their teachers, means fewer teachers to be trained. The professional establishment of teacher trainers has been noticing that there is a huge population of adult learners, much larger than any projection of the future numbers of children, and—well—a teacher is a teacher. Existing faculty members have genuinely been extending their interests to young adults—community college students—and to others. However this may have been happening with individuals, university administrations have concluded that the education of adults is a normal and legitimate extension of the present capacities of their faculties; usually without acknowledging that work with adult learners requires different skills. As a result, individual professors, with quite legitimate skills in the education of children, have been moved into responsibilities for educators of adults. There is nothing wrong with this, as long as systematic opportunity for these people to learn some of the differences in working with adults is in place. Adult educators are committed to the belief that adults, all adults including university professors of education, can learn. We had better, in the next few years, remember that commitment.

In the case of the departments of adult education at the Universities of British Columbia and Montreal, the extension of the interests of the rest of the faculty would appear to be the case. A few years ago, at the University of British Columbia, the adult educators were moved into a department of Higher, Administrative and Adult Education. Subsequently it was proposed that the adult education group, as a distinct group, be eliminated, and its members distributed amongst other faculty groupings. Students would be able to pursue a program of studies in adult education only by means of the selection of courses and faculty members from groups organized under other rubrics. So far this proposal has not been implemented, though there are no guarantees.

An argument can be advanced for that sort of arrangement, provided, and only provided, that the faculty as a whole is organized on the basis of a conception of continuing or life-long education. The interests of adults must be functionally and intellectually incorporated in the entire range of study. That may be, at present, too much to hope for, but the UBC proposal may also be a glimpse of the real future.

At the University of Montreal, repeated attempts have been made to reorganize the faculty, with the Department of Androgogie folded into a new grouping, including Educational Administration. So far, this has been resisted by the androgogic group, but it is far from sure that the resistance will be successful.

At the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, the issue appears to have been one of the conflict between whether it is a school of graduate or professional study. After a review by the Ontario Council of Graduate Schools in 1984-85, the Ph.D. program was closed because the faculty members had not published sufficiently in refereed journals. No other reason was given for the closure, and no discussion of the availability of such journals or of their value was permitted. A glance at the faculty members is revealing. Half of them have come from field practice, in mid-life, and the other half are what might be termed "career academics". What is probable is that those who entered in mid-career have not been entirely "seized" by the significance of publishing in the small number of small circulation refereed journals available. That this statistic, the number of published articles, is a measure of their research capabilities, and therefore a measure of their ability to supervise Ph.D. students, was unappealable. That only career academics, with the proper respect for the refereed journals, are the best teachers for practitioners of adult education now, and the the future, is a matter that urgently needs debate. Perhaps the designation of a professional school is the right one, and the existing departments should make sure that they are very good professional schools and forget about competing on grounds that they cannot win, where, perhaps, winning would be irrelevant to adult education. Professional schools in universities have served medicine, law, social work, for example, very well indeed, and that is not bad company for adult education to be in. However, we should also note that almost all of these professional schools are now in trouble.



At a 1985 meeting of a relatively new Learned Society, The Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education, an oral survey of all of the existing academic programs in adult education revealed that the big programs were in difficulty, while the smaller ones were flourishing. Further discussion revealed that the big and older programs were those with specific designations of adult education, while the smaller ones were more integrated in various ways with dominant programs of educational studies. It is likely that the model reflected by the smaller and newer programs will prevail. The bigger ones seem doomed to some form of integration. However, there must be a struggle to ensure that what they are integrated into is educational study, and teaching, that is based on a concept of "continuing education". That is, an educational system that includes all ages and that is open to predominantly voluntary participation at every stage of life. That, in fact, is what is happening to education in Canada now, and we must be sure that the academic study of education reflects that reality.

We pointed out that one of the dominant characteristics of existing academic departments of adult education is that without exception they are graduate level departments. Why this is the case is simply a matter of history. Existing faculties of education in Canada, for the most part, grew out of teacher training institutions. Prior to the late 1950's, any Canadian wishing to study education as an academic discipline, distinct from wishing to train as a teacher of children and youth, was obliged to pursue such study outside of Canada, predominantly in a few institutions in the United States of America. With the growth of teacher training institutions in Canada into schools of academic study, it was inevitable that adult education, a marginal enterprise at the time, would find a place at the graduate level. After you had learned how to teach children and young people in school, you encountered the teaching of adults. Much of the school curriculum, mathematics in particular, has been constructed on the basis of such historical development. There is no logical reason why descriptive geometry cannot be taught in grade two or three.

The result was that these graduate schools of adult education attracted not only students with an intellectual interest in education, which included increasing numbers of adults, but they also attracted larger and larger numbers of individuals who found themselves faced with the challenge of practicing the education of adults, and wished to learn how to improve their skills and understanding. Many of these individuals had not trained as teachers of children, and many came from situations unfamiliar to the conventional perspective of what the practice of education consisted of: they came from hospitals, banks, insurance companies, churches, voluntary organizations, in short, all of the major locations of adult life. They included individuals already professionally trained: nurses, doctors, social workers, clergymen, administrators, lawyers, and some teachers who were aware of the changes taking place in formal education. The result has been a formidable and enormously stimulating intellectual mixture; what, in our opinion, the university ought to be. But

in the somewhat narrow academic practices that presently dominate Canadian universities, that ferment has caused problems.

The major characteristic that these students brought was that they understood how to combine learning, of a systematic and determined nature, with all of the ordinary demands of adult life. Unlike the conventional graduate student, they had not spent their lives entirely as students. Some of the academic programs, OISE as an example, constructed their admissions policies, and their programs, on the basis that such knowledge was not teachable; it could be learned from experience only. To try to teach young and conventional students, who had never interrupted their schooling, about the circumstances of the adult student, was impossible. It could only result in knowledge without understanding.

The dilemma then was, and is, that a group of relatively highly trained individuals demand from a graduate school of adult education a greater ability to practice adult education. The result has been a very high demand for teaching and discussion, and the use of the results of research from an enormous variety of other academic disciplines. After all, all disciplines are the result of people learning things—and it is to this learning that adult educators must direct their attention.

As a result of the creation of departments of adult education, and the legitimate demands of students, programs in those departments have been an uneasy mixture of apparently "technical" and "academic" courses. A further result has been a division of faculty members between those who have been fundamentally preoccupied with teaching, and the intellectual demands of already highly qualified students, and those faculty who have pursued the conventional paths of publishable research—and with distinction. While we can, and should, argue that the combination of such interests within single departments has benefitted everyone, the fact is that the dominant university system in Canada rewards only one of the two parties to the enterprise.

Another perspective is that some of what is now taught in academic departments of adult education is really not graduate level study at all, but should be taught at the level of teacher training which is, in Canada, a curious mixture of graduate and undergraduate instruction. This argument has some point, if we consider what ought to take place, in Canada, with respect to the training of school teachers in the future. In Ontario there are now over 50,000 full-time, day-time, secondary students, over the age of 21. Most of them are women, and their numbers have grown by 700% in eight years. There is every reason to believe that those numbers will continue to grow as the numbers in conventional age groups continue to decline. Indeed, what appears to be the case is that the future of the public school system, at least in that province, depends on adult students, not on children. For that reason, teacher training must adapt itself to what we have learned over the past fifty years about working with adult learners. That is to say, that future graduates of teacher training

institutions must learn to be teachers, irrespective of the chronological age of their students. They must be trained to teach forty-year olds, twelve-year olds, or any mixture of ages they encounter. It is very instructive to examine the current practices and materials of teacher training and to discover how much is unself-consciously based on assumptions about the ages and social inclinations of the students.

The existing departments of adult education that are already administratively integrated have some formidable tasks ahead of them. Those that face integration, like the University of British Columbia, the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, and the University of Montreal, have equally formidable challenges, but for them, the lines are drawn more clearly, if no less painfully. There is only one final measure, however difficult it may be to define and make operational: the interests of the adult students must not be sacrificed to administrative convenience, or any other.

There are still, however, lessons to be learned from existing departments; how they grew and flourished over three decades. We must not abandon recklessly or in panic what we have had. They were for the most part made up of a mixture of the following: mature adult students, already with some professional training and with considerable experience in dealing with adult learning under a wide variety of circumstances; faculties composed of career academics with considerable experience with and respect for the rituals and procedures of academic life; and of others with academic qualifications who have spent considerable periods of their lives in the practice of adult education. In these communities, the search for truth about adult learning was and is pursued with reasonable skepticism about all established beliefs and procedures. Whether that truth is to be discovered only by conventional research, and made manifest only in the pages of frail but properly refereed journals has been a constant subject of debate.

The increasing use of "qualitative research methods" does suggest that it may equally well be found in the intense interactions of these communities, and all other human communities. For that reason we have tried to treat our students, and they have tried to respond, not only as vessels to be shaped by superior knowledge, but as participants in these enquiries, contributing invaluable knowledge and experience of their own. For that reason their presence in the departments, and their accomplishments afterwards have been and remain of critical concern to us. Once learning is acknowledged to have escaped from the confines of the classroom, indeed of an educational system, its forms seem to be variable, elusive, and subject to constant change. We must not surrender what we have been learning about learning, without a struggle, to a university system which has misplaced its sense of mission precisely because it has lost its dominance of particular outcomes of learning.

In contemporary Canada, the answers to that question, those questions, are not certain. But the question must be asked, and asked on an everyday

basis. If we are to redistribute, as we must, our teaching, over different students and in a much greater variety of situations, we must retain the kind of exchange that these departments have represented at their best in the past two decades. Despite the present circumstances and the "take-over" threats from all sides, we must take what we have represented seriously, and not allow these precious lights to go out.

So, having spend forty years or more in the "marginal" wilderness, both practically and intellectually, we must now face the problems of success. These are apt to be far more difficult than those we have faced in the past, precisely because there is so much at stake. Everything of significance is determined in the minds of "men" (persons) and when those persons are also learners, the world is there to win—or to lose.

We must accept that there will be many new people and organizations emerging, within and without universities, as teachers of adult educators, and we must accept that they can learn, as we accept that all adults can learn. And, we must fight within our own and other organizations to make sure the integrity of the learner, adult or otherwise, is and remains the bottom line. We have enjoyed a certain freedom of self-determination these past twenty years, we must now prove to ourselves and to others that is has been justified.