

ACADEMIC ADULT EDUCATION: A COMMENT

Larry Orton

All of adult education is going through significant changes. These changes may amount to a crisis. The symptoms are all around us and the situation Thomas' article presents can be seen as a symptom. The crisis may be a natural function of the maturity of the field of adult education, as Thomas suggests.

Thomas says that "the academic arms of adult education are in trouble" and points to several reasons why. Experienced adult educators—especially if they have undertaken study in one of the departments which concern Thomas—will understand the reasons he documents. But a major problem is one that most academic adult educators admit to only very reluctantly: too many of the faculty in our departments of adult education have not played by the rule of academic life: publish or perish. While some might disagree with universities' use of this single measure of ability, the reality is that it *is* the measure and that few of those holding academic appointments in adult education actually publish. It is no wonder that the journals are thin and little read. Thomas doesn't suggest many solutions, and so when I finished re-reading his article I had the impression that one of the country's leading adult educators felt defeated. If that is the case, God help us. Not that the solutions are readily apparent.

But it does seem to me that any solution is going to grow out of some understanding of what we expect from academia. My own expectations of any academic department in a university are identical to my expectations of universities as a whole. Research: I passionately want our academics to describe and comment upon the world seen through the eyes of the adult educator. Perhaps with more publication, those still in positions to make decisions relating to the academic arms of our field would have a greater understanding of the extent of the adult educator's concerns. Teaching: I want our academics to lead in the teaching of those who are interested in adult learning. Public Service: I want our academics to be available to help—selectively, since so few can't possibly serve such an enormous field—those parts of the field most in need of assistance.

It also seems to me that any solution will grow out of a firm commitment to the need for some centre(s) for the advanced study of adult education to continue to exist in Canada. The form the centre(s) might take could be debated forever, and it probably is not a productive debate. Going the route of a professional school has its advantages and I can't see what objections might be sustained so long as Ph.D. level study remains. Moreover, whether adult education is best served by separate academic departments or centres is a point that could be debated *ad infinitum*. (More than twenty years ago, Roby Kidd raised a similar point in his study of adult education in Canadian universities.) I expect that few who have undertaken university-level study in adult education would argue seriously

in favor of integration. The field is just too broad and the focus of our teacher training institutions is just too narrow. Adult education is much more than what goes on in classrooms. Those whose orientation is towards our traditional educational institutions are unable to transmit the attitudes and skills needed to deal with the multitude of situations faced by adult educators who work in voluntary organizations, governments and quasi-government bodies as well as in our established educational institutions. I, for one, would not want to pursue a graduate degree in adult education in a department in which even a sizable minority of the faculty obtained most of their experience in the traditional educational system.

What we need is a good debate on the questions Thomas has raised. While it obviously affects the academic adult educator the most, and while we should expect them to take the lead in such a debate, it must involve others in the field. Without a strong argument from adult educators our universities may come to expect, by default if not by conscious decision, Canadians to undertake their graduate study in adult education in another country.

Adult education is coming of age and being recognized by more and more people. When I began my career in adult education in 1968, the people occupying many positions of responsibility knew little adult education and were not in the least interested. The sexy parts of education were elsewhere and some of the best educators were attracted there. Hall-Dennis and their counterparts excited interest in elementary and secondary education. The expansion of Canada's community college and university systems and a host of reports on post-secondary education made that field attractive. Now, that is behind us. Now, the people occupying senior positions throughout our educational system sound knowledgeable about adult education, are proud of their involvement in the field, and vie with one another to establish their credentials.

Thomas doesn't suggest that we cry over the ironies of the situation, but that we welcome the added resources and the new challenge. His article is a good and healthy opening for a debate that I hope will engage practitioners as well as academics in the development of an agenda for the academic arms of our field.

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