

pourrons-nous dire s'il y a eu développement ou recul vers une plus grande accessibilité et une plus grande adaptation des pratiques.

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CHALLENGING, INTERESTING AND IMPORTANT

ADULT EDUCATION AS THEORY, PRACTICE AND RESEARCH: THE CAPTIVE TRIANGLE

Robin Usher and Ian Bryant. 1989. New York: Routledge.

Usher and Bryant have written a challenging, interesting, and important book. Not only will it influence future discussions about the academic practice of adult education within colleges and universities, but also that which takes place in other variegated institutional settings. More important, *The captive triangle*, as I will refer to it in lieu of the book's more formal title, *Adult education as theory, practice and research: The captive triangle*, repositions the entire realm of adult and continuing education practice in ways that confound, or at least complicate, prior hierarchical relationships.

This is a book concerned with theory; specifically it provides an understanding of the changing relationships between theory, practice, and research. The concept of the captive triangle implies that the three sides are related, and that we are, in effect, captive to this triangular relationship. But, Usher and Bryant do not make any side foundational in ways that would freeze them into one single order.

For example, a typical paradigmatic relationship is to wish to see adult education practice as ideally derivative of theory and formal research. This ordering privileges theory and research, and theoreticians and researchers, at the expense of practice and practitioners. Problems in practice are seen as arising out of an inability to apply theory correctly or an imperfect understanding of theory. And practice problems are of interest to academicians only insofar as they are helpful in developing or improving theory and suggestions future research directions.

Readers of Schon's *The reflective practitioner* (1983) and *Educating the reflective practitioner* (1987) will be familiar with this traditional subordinated depiction of practice within the professions. Schon's analysis of practice and practice problems showing the rigor and logic of practice, and the inter-relationship of thought and action, has rescued practice from being subsumed as simply technique. Similarly Usher and Bryant have recast adult education practitioners as thoughtful professionals, dealing with difficult problems not usually amenable to technocratic or scientific manipulation.

The captive triangle argues that practice must be understood in terms of practice and must stand the test of practice—not the test of theory. Theory cannot “prove” practice. To the contrary, it is practice that determines the value of theory. The authors emphasize the need for critical practice wherein adult education practitioners undertake reflective research on their own practice and are thus in a position to critically evaluate their own knowledge claims as well as those of their colleagues.

Key to their analysis of reflective practice is the concept of “situatedness” (p. 3) or the location of practice within a real world of constraints, opportunities, social values, and other actors. Adult educators should convert practice into “praxis”, a form of practice that is both “reflective and reflexive” (p. 92) in order to free themselves from habitual and routine ways of working that do not acknowledge the grounding of practice. By coming to see and understand their situatedness through “reflection-in-action” (p. 81) they can come to the realization that nothing they do is either ahistorical or independent of context. A hermeneutic understanding is then possible, viz. that all models and analytical schema involve prejudices and prejudgments that cannot be understood apart from contextual distortion. Looking at practice from this new perspective leads one to question the previous taken-for-grantedness of routine and the concomitant mindset of treadmill.

In a similar vein, some readers will find especially valuable and enlightening the post-empiricist critique of the natural science research paradigm, based on Kuhn’s work (p. 14), which likewise shows that all paradigms are socially located and that therefore research is never a neutral observation of facts. An over-reliance on the natural science paradigm has led scholars to accept the world as given, and relegated research to the discovery of facts and basic relationships between observable phenomena (positivism). This has led to a hierarchy of foundation disciplines, which differ in their methodological approaches to knowledge, and the traditional triangular arrangement of theory, research, and practice described at the outset.

The importance of making explicit practitioners’ informal theory, or the values, assumptions and practical reasonings which actually guide practice and provide standards for decision making, is a central tenet of *The captive triangle*. Without holding informal theory up to the light, it may actually serve to impede reflection leading to being stuck in practice (pp. 86-87). The authors posit a place for formal educational theory within this context as providing another form of critical perspective from which to view practice—again, not as an arbiter of correctness.

At times, trying to understand the arguments on theory set forth in this book is demanding; I would not recommend reading when one’s mind is not at its keenest; but the difficulty is worth the effort and many readers will find their investment of effort to be amply rewarded. The discussion of “action research”, for example, rescues a useful concept from the realm of relentless ambiguity. Seen from a hermeneutical perspective, action research holds the promise of

changing and improving aspects of practice by subjecting the research process itself to the same type of critical examination being applied to practice. Holding out action research as reflective practice provides a tool and common ground for both academics and practitioners to join together on a footing of equality in the spirit of mutual enquiry. This, in and by itself, can lead to a greater connection than heretofore between what happens in college and university adult education and how adult education is practised in the field.

It is therefore surprising that I could not find any recommendations for graduate study or enough actual projects that could have made this important connection more palpable. Yet, the book is exceedingly valuable because it so strongly questions the current traditional orientation to research in adult education and the dominance of the natural science paradigm.

Compelling academicians to see themselves as engaging in "mere" practice (p. 194) is both heuristic and long overdue. I recall an adult education conference I attended several years ago where I asked a professor if he was an adult educator. The answer was "no", he was an historian of adult education! The status cleavages within adult education that serve to separate the field and the academy undermine the evolution of adult education knowledge which, as the authors maintain, is as much practitioner generated as it is scholar generated. In fact, after reading *The captive triangle* one is strongly tempted to place a greater burden of justification than usual upon the academy to show how it has enhanced the practice of adult education.

Regrettably, the book's important but abstruse text will be a deterrent to its being read by many non-academicians. However those who teach graduate students and write for practitioner journals can serve as key links in transmitting Usher and Bryant's important messages to this other appropriate audience.

The captive triangle is another exceptional contribution by Routledge to the evolution of serious thinking about contemporary adult education. When I consider some of their other recent volumes including Michael Collins' *Adult education as vocation: A critical role for the adult educator* (1991) and Barry Bright's edited volume *Theory and practice in the study of adult education: The epistemological debate* (1989), I realize how much my own thoughts have changed and evolved away from a more cloistered instrumentalism.

One suggestion for the publishers is to reinvest some of their revenue and engage the services of a typographical designer who can help place these notable contributions to the adult education literature in a more user-friendly format.

References

- Schon, D.A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner*. New York: Basic Books.
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