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Stepping In and Stepping Out: Adult Educators
Teaching in a Teacher Preparation Program

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STEPPING IN AND STEPPING OUT: ADULT EDUCATORS TEACHING IN A TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAM

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Abstract

In this paper we offer an account of our experiences of transition during a restructuring of our Faculty of Education, which necessitated addressing and transcending a perceived boundary to bring adult education scholarship and practice into a two-year “BE After” degree program preparing pre-service teachers for the K–12 school system. As we explore the tensions of stepping out of the margins and stepping into the mainstream, we explore how our voices, as adult educators, have the potential to offer an alternative perspective not only within our own adult education classes and with each other as colleagues, but within broader faculty and university change.

Résumé

Dans cet article, nous vous proposons un compte-rendu de nos expériences de transition dans le cadre d'une restructuration de notre faculté d'éducation. Nous avons dû examiner et briser la frontière perçue entre le domaine de l'éducation des adultes et la préparation de futurs enseignants de la maternelle à la douzième année d'un programme (après Bac) de deux ans. La tension entre être privilégié dans notre domaine et accédé à un public plus large, nous a permis d'explorer la façon dont nous pouvons, en tant qu'éducateurs d'adultes, offrir un autre point de vue, non seulement au sein de nos propres classes d'éducation des adultes et, entre nous, collègues qui travaillent dans le domaine, mais au sein des changements qui s'opèrent dans les facultés et à l'université en général.

Introduction

In this paper we revisit and relocate our own experiences of transition by critically reflecting on the broader process of transformation that universities are undergoing in Canada and beyond. First we offer an account of our own experiences of transition during a

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restructuring of our Faculty of Education, which necessitated addressing and transcending a perceived boundary to bring adult education scholarship and practice into a two-year "BEd After" degree program preparing pre-service teachers for the kindergarten to Grade 12 (K-12) school system. This transition involved developing and delivering an adult education course to pre-service teachers entitled Professional Development and Lifelong Learning (PDLL). We reflect on the development of the PDLL course against the backdrop and tensions of stepping out of the margins (Glowacki-Dudka & Helvie-Mason, 2004; Imel, Brockett, & James, 2000) into what is sometimes referred to as mainstream K-12 formal educational discourse. Indeed, both the Adult Education Research Conference (Glowacki-Dudka & Helvie-Mason) and the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education conference (Groen & Kawalilak, 2013) have addressed the issue of how to integrate adult education within colleges and faculties of education, where the dominant focus is on K-12 formal education, while trying to keep its own identity. Part of our challenge is to engage with our colleagues in the more mainstream K-12 area to articulate and demonstrate the important contribution we in adult education make to the faculty as a whole.

We step out into this larger space thoughtfully, purposefully, and strategically, as we believe that the location of the margins for adult educators can become too comfortable and secure. Indeed, Wise and Glowacki-Dudka (2004) asserted that, depending on how one defines margins, there can be significant advantages to being located there. While being on the margins can mean a reduction of resources and level of influence in the strategic direction of an organization, it also offers a place of observation "from which to examine and challenge dominant ideology and practice" (p. 1). However, this position of observation can also have a shadow side, as tightly held perspectives on what adult education is and where it belongs may in fact perpetuate those very margins that adult educators have sought to dismantle, overcome, and transcend. In fact, we argue that the social justice underpinnings of adult education can also offer adult learners in the pre-service teacher preparation program and, indeed, our faculty alternative perspectives beyond the dominant neo-liberal message of performance and accountability at all costs.

Secondly, we locate our own experiences against the backdrop of other Canadian adult education departments and specializations and the larger context of university transitions and pressures due to larger societal forces. As we explore the tensions of teaching within the pre-service teacher education program at our university, we explore how our voices, as adult educators, have the potential to offer an alternative perspective not only within our own adult education classes and with each other as colleagues, but within broader faculty and university change. We also explore some significant international trends in higher education and the role that adult educators can play in contributing to a more holistic curricular experience for those who both teach and learn within a pre-service teacher education program context.

To set the stage for this exploration we begin by briefly describing the course we developed and launched within our pre-service teacher education program.

The Professional Development and Lifelong Learning (PDLL) Course: An Overview

Drawing from the overview within our course outline, the following description offers a framework for the PDLL course:

This course focuses on *teachers as lifelong, adult learners* through an adult education and adult learning theoretical lens and places emphasis on how pre-service teachers understand and encourage their learning, and the impacts of that learning on teaching practice. Theoretical frameworks, philosophical underpinnings, and reflections on experiences of adult learning will be explored.

The goal of this course is to foster understanding and responsibility of continuing professional development and lifelong learning within the teaching practice. (EDUC 408, PDL course syllabus, 2013)

In summary, our goal in designing the PDL course was to focus on “teacher as lifelong, adult learner” and on how *our* individual and collective sensitivities, responsiveness, passion for learning, and desire to be fascinated have the potential to inspire and ignite the same in others. Moving into the implementation phase, we invited learners to reflect on significant lifelong learning moments experienced within and beyond formal and informal education contexts. In turn, we prompted our students to move into a deeper reflection, namely, to consider how these significant learning moments shaped and influenced their own personal and professional lifelong learning journeys. Adult learners in this course were provided a safe and challenging space to reflect on and explore linkages and tensions regarding currently held philosophy, values, and teaching with respect to some of the philosophical underpinnings that inform adult education praxis.

Introducing Adult Education into the Teacher Preparation Program

The development and implementation of the PDL course occurred as a result of major restructuring of our Faculty of Education – a process fraught with tensions, challenges, and opportunities (Darling-Hammond & Hammerness, 2011). Part of the restructuring involved dismantling an existing teacher preparation program strongly supported by several senior professors who had developed and taught within the program for many years. In turn, as the design of the new program unfolded, faculty in our adult learning specialization were offered an opportunity to step into our faculty’s broader mandate. This “opportunity” was one that we, as an adult education specialization, had aggressively lobbied for. More specifically, we purposefully and strategically *invited ourselves* into conversations early in the restructuring of the pre-service teacher education program, and we drew attention to the critical importance of understanding education and learning as extending far beyond the bricks and mortar of traditional K–12 schooling. We did our homework by deeply exploring the Alberta Teachers’ Association’s aims, mission, and values and by aligning lifelong learning philosophy and principles to the ongoing development of teachers, to informed teaching praxis, and to teaching excellence. We also focused on some of the goals articulated in provincial documents pertaining to teacher education and spoke to communities of practice (CoPs) and professional learning communities in which teachers could feed their own passion and fascination for learning, share and co-create knowledge, and engage in deep, ongoing, critical inquiry. Our main message focused on the importance of creating a space where pre-service teachers could also explore informal and incidental learning, alternative knowledge acquisition traditions, and knowledge sharing.

We also spoke about the need to engage in authentic dialogue on topics such as privilege, equity, human rights, inclusion, advocacy, deepening social consciousness, and being agents of change. This drew support from the dean and associate dean of undergraduate programs to develop and implement the PDLL (adult education) course in our teacher preparation program. This would be the first course of its kind in Canada within a Bachelor of Education program.

Responding to the Invitation

Not all of our colleagues in the adult learning specialization greeted the invitation for greater involvement within the Faculty of Education with equal enthusiasm. Some expressed concern that developing an adult education course as a core offering intended for pre-service teachers might significantly compromise the integrity of our work as educators and researchers. This concern emerged in tandem with ongoing discourse in the field of adult education (Rubenson, 2000; Selman & Selman, 2009) in which some scholars contested that the philosophy and practice informing professional development within professional contexts (ongoing teacher education and nursing, for example), training and development within human resource contexts, and employment preparation programs offered in vocational-oriented post-secondary education centres were not aligned to the true and historical roots of adult education and adult learning. Implicit in these concerns was the notion that true adult education and adult learning are tightly intertwined in a critical approach and pedagogy located only within very specific contexts or offered to a select audience. Conversely, then, would we not be compromising or diluting the essence of our field of scholarship and practice if we engaged in mainstream arenas such as pre-service teacher education?

We agree that the field of adult education has a distinct and important heritage of "active efforts to critique and change society in some way" (Selman, 1998, p. 118), as we also take up a critical pedagogical approach that works "*against claims of capital and the political, economic, and social conditions with which it undermines ... the education of free people*" (Grace, 2006 p. 119). However, we choose to see our engagement within the pre-service teacher education program not as a dilution of our strong heritage and critical pedagogical approach, but as an opportunity to introduce an important and new audience to the field of adult education.

Rising Tensions

What we did not realize, at least initially, was that this new audience would also include other colleagues in the Faculty of Education – individuals with extensive experience in teaching but little or no background in adult education and adult learning philosophy and theory. In other words, some colleagues assigned to teach a section or two of the PDLL course were located outside our adult learning specialization, although the majority had significant experience teaching the previous version of the pre-service teacher education program. In addition, many of these same colleagues interpreted adult education and adult learning as a specific focus and approach related to formal and traditional, post-secondary, continuing education, workplace, and vocational contexts. The assumed connotations were that the age of the student determined whether the student was an adult learner and that those who taught adult students were, by default, adult educators. Many struggled to understand adult education as a field of scholarship (Milton, Watkins, Studdard, & Burch, 2003) and practice. Others referred to adult education as "confusing," not distinct from pedagogy; some perceived adult education

themes and foci to be “soft” and mainly intended for personal and leisure development. To elaborate, one of our colleagues assigned to teach one of the PDLL sections asserted that adult education was lacking theoretical foundation and intellectual scholarship.

After significant reflection and dialogue, we realized that, in addition to the task of developing an adult education course for pre-service teachers, and as the primary authors and leaders in this program development initiative, we needed to deepen and broaden our colleagues’ understanding and appreciation of adult education and adult learning as a field of scholarship and convince them of the relevance of locating an adult education course within a pre-service teacher education program. We responded to this invitation and appreciated that developing such a course extended significantly beyond the task we had initially taken on. This became a living, breathing, iterative process and experience as we engaged in ongoing dialogue and debate with faculty members teaching across the Bachelor of Education program.

Communities of Practice

We soon realized that the CoP model, a key design component of our PDLL course, was unfolding and being realized by and within our PDLL course development team. The PDLL course syllabus makes reference to CoPs:

This course has been designed to support learning experiences guided by a *Communities of Practice (CoP)* model. Communities of Practice have been described as “*groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis*” (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002, p. 4). The CoP model and framework will be introduced in plenary/lectures. Then, within your “Seminar classes”, you will work together as a CoP as you explore, reflect, and make meaning of the four key themes that guide this course and the relationship of these themes to your ongoing personal and professional [pre-service teacher] development. (EDUC 408, PDLL course syllabus, 2013)

This CoP framework provides a safe and challenging learning space to learn continually, adapt to change readily, and evaluate critically (Wenger, 1998). Referring to the “sustained pursuit of a shared experience” (Wenger, p. 45), the collective learning potential within a CoP is significant. Wenger further elaborated:

The term *practice* is sometimes used as an antonym for theory, ideas, ideals, or talk. However, my use of the term does not reflect a dichotomy between the practical and the theoretical, ideals and reality, or talking and doing. Communities of practice include all of these, even if there are sometimes discrepancies between what we say and what we do, what we aspire to and what we settle for, what we know and what we can manifest. We all have our own theories and ways of understanding the world, and our communities of practice are places where we develop, negotiate, and share them. (p. 48)

CoPs are not designed to avoid or be free of tensions. Rather, this structure provides a safe space within which to explore and make meaning of different perspectives, different practices, and other ways of being and doing in the world. As our PDDL course development team took on shape and form, we continued to reflect on the questions: How is safety within this group supported and experienced and how is challenge within this group supported and experienced?

Murillo (2011) made reference to connections between learning and the core elements of Wenger's (1998) CoP model and referred to (1) learning as belonging, (2) learning as becoming, (3) learning as experience, and (4) learning as doing. We recognized that these connections are not always attained or realized easily as, according to Wenger, CoPs progress through a variety of developmental stages: when discovering commonalities (Potential Stage), exploring connectedness and negotiating community (Coalescing Stage), and engaging in joint activities and adapting to changing circumstances (Active Stage). The Active Stage is shaped by the interest, commitment, and relationships that form within a CoP. These represent the first three development stages of Wenger's CoP model.

Throughout the course development process we committed to authentic dialogue in support of these three stages. We recognized that without a deepened understanding and appreciation of the perspective and expertise that we, as course instructors, each brought to the table, we could not successfully collaborate in creating a course that addressed the adult learning needs of pre-service teachers. By supporting and educating our colleagues on the history, philosophy, and meaning of adult education, we invited our team members to reflect on their own adult learning journeys. Engaging in this type of dialogue contributed to a rich discourse, one that explored tensions that emerged from what were sometimes perceived as redundancies and/or competing agendas. Dialogue served as an invitation to loosen our grip on tightly held notions, beliefs, and assumptions and critically reflect on challenges and tensions through multiple lenses in search of common ground.

Dialogue was ongoing throughout the course development process. Out of this, our course framework emerged. When course instructors engage openly and authentically within a dialogue space, tensions are bound to surface. Indeed, there were moments when individual agendas seeped in to challenge the collective, co-creative spirit intended to inform our work. These were times when the shorelines that defined our respective disciplines were more obvious. These currents were acknowledged within the team and, through care, compassion, respectful attentiveness to one another, and negotiation, we nudged ourselves back to a dialogical pathway. Being authentically present to one another was critical in that emotions fermenting just beneath the surface had the potential to significantly impact, ergo derail, the overall tone and intentions of our collective work and focus.

Unmasking the Real Threats to Adult Education Programs

Having proposed that the field of adult education offers an alternative perspective and voice within the broader mandate of a faculty of education, we seek to probe the causal societal forces that motivate us to not only maintain, but also increase our vigilance in holding this position. Glancing over our shoulders into our relatively recent academic past and longer history of community engagement, we reiterate that our adult education heritage reflects our "vital mission for 'really useful knowledge' that helps create a more equitable world at individual, family, community, and societal levels" (Nesbit, 2006, p. 17).

Over the past century this mission has been animated through a broad base of programs and activities that included social, community, and social justice agendas that strengthened local communities (Cruikshank, 2007). On a parallel track, our academic programs in adult education, established in the 1950s and 1960s, were committed to supporting such community-based programming (Spencer & Cui, 2011).

During the early 1980s the emphasis on local programming and access for all adult learners began to run counter to societal forces that fostered the growth of neo-liberal economic policies and the rising importance of globalization. Corporations that moved beyond local or even national economies of scale relocated their manufacturing to the cheapest and most efficient locations around the world, aspiring to sell their goods to the most profitable markets (Jarvis, 2009). In turn, the Thatcher–Reagan era of the 1980s exacerbated the impact of such a profound change by enacting their belief in minimalist states. Publicly owned companies were privatized and assets were sold off. The Canadian government and other governments around the world followed suit by disassembling the welfare state. “Faced with declining union participation, the fall of the Berlin wall, the privatization of public industries, and burgeoning consumerism and individualization, any residual hope for socialism seemed naïve” (Plumb, 2009, p. 6).

The ripple effect of these new driving forces on our economy has been deeply felt within the field of adult education. Indeed, the swirling debate around the term *lifelong learning* demonstrates the colliding forces between globalization and support of the adult learning needs of local communities. Until the 1990s lifelong learning referred to the “education of people in the community so that they could work for the people’s benefit and liberal adult education of an extra-mural benefit” (Jarvis, 2009, p. 21). However, in Canada, as in other G8 countries, the government began to take up the term to encourage its citizenry to continuously develop new skills to keep up with the knowledge economy. We are now told that it is solely our responsibility, not the government’s, to invest in ongoing education and skills training. In turn, through continuous upgrading of skills, we will earn higher salaries and contribute to the Canadian economy. As a result, scholars and practitioners in the field of adult education rarely associate themselves with the notion of lifelong learning, arguing that it has been instrumentalized and appropriated by government and industry for economic gain and no longer reflects the underlying mission and purpose of adult education.

Narrowing our focus to adult education programs within a university context, we are, indeed, feeling the effects of neo-liberal policies and global forces. As many universities take up the agenda to train citizenry to contribute to the economy, we need to watch out for the erosion of part of our role in offering a critical perspective and commentary on the direction of society. “High skills policies emphasize colleges, universities, and training organizations as the basis of our economic competitiveness” (Cruikshank, 2007, p. 34). In addition, over this past decade, the role of many adult education and continuing education programs has shifted or, in many cases, has simply become extinct as programs have been gradually reduced or shut down. Currently, for example, university continuing education departments and divisions rarely offer extension programs that address the needs of disenfranchised learners. Rather, their initiatives have become a profit-generating arm of the university. If profits are not realized within an identified period, these programs simply disappear. In addition, the literature supports that those who have accessed continuing education in the past are typically the same demographic that continue to access these

programs in the present. This is significant in that, as adult educators, we have widened, not narrowed, the gap between those who are most educated and those who are least educated (Cunningham, 1993). Many adult education programs have also morphed into organizational development and organizational change programs that do little to critique the underlying socio-economic forces that run counter to supporting local communities and adult learners.

For those of us still located within a dwindling number of adult education departments and/or specializations, the events over the past few decades are more than worrisome. These events and current neo-liberal influences and agendas threaten to undermine and eventually cause the extinction of adult education programs guided by the good work of adult education scholars and practitioners. Therefore, our underlying mission to work toward just, equitable, and vital communities at the local, national, and international levels is even more urgent. Translating this urgency into our role within the university context and, more specifically, in faculties of education, compels us to step in from the margins and authentically engage with our colleagues and our students to offer an alternative.

We turn to the work of Selman (1998) to make the point that the field of adult education has a multi-faceted agenda that reinforces the notion that we must step out and widen our circle of access and engagement. He suggested that three overlapping and important services need to be provided in adult education, "each as a distinct area though not discreet or mutually exclusive" (p. 410): (1) concern for "academic, credential and vocational attainment" largely in the formal education sector (p. 411); (2) provision of "organized educational activities for social interest and development" (p. 411); and (3) adult education for "social action and change" (p. 411). Through Selman's lens, we realize that opportunities for exposure to adult education services need to be greatly expanded and not diminished. Part of our challenge in ensuring and expanding our relevancy is to take up Selman's suggestion that an important arena for adult education is within the formal education sector by venturing into nursing, social work, business, kinesiology, and, yes, the mainstream teacher preparation program within our own faculties of education. As we have already indicated, expanding the potential for access does not mean that we stop infusing a critically informed and politically engaged pedagogy (Grace, 2006). Conversely, by stepping into the circle and widening our reach, we have the opportunity to genuinely highlight the importance of adult learning in varied contexts: "By initially thematizing the agency of adult educators in both defending and advancing the interest of learners and the intrinsic value of learning processes, we highlight the significance of our politically engaged work toward a more just and equal society" (Collins, 2006, p. 122).

Returning to our emerging role in the pre-service teacher education program at the University of Calgary, we realize that a both/and approach is necessary, even beneficial, as we intend to be an adult education specialization that both survives and thrives. While we need to cultivate teaching and research within the field of adult education, we also need to realize the opportunities presented to us when we step out of the margins into mainstream teacher preparation and other professional programs across other faculties in our university. In particular, by working with colleagues across various specializations in our faculty in designing and instructing the PDLL course, we have been offered a valuable opportunity to reach *across* and engage in ongoing dialogue. In turn, we are beginning to see a gradual dissolution of the perception that the field of adult education has little to contribute to a faculty of education and, at best, should remain in the margins. We need to continue to

build on the rich possibility of cross-fertilization occurring in the collaborative instructional approach used in the teacher preparation program and cultivate other opportunities to enable dialogue across our programs. For example, emergent cross-specialization research clusters in diverse areas, such as narrative research and arts-based teaching and learning, that reach across programs offer exciting opportunities to dissolve boundaries and remove notions of who is in the mainstream and who is in the margins.

At a most basic level, if we do not participate in and influence broader teaching and research agendas, we will be seen as dispensable and will be easily extinguished. In other words, we assert that adult educators can no longer afford to draw such bold lines between our field of scholarship and practice and mainstream professional education. This contributes to siloes and not to cross-disciplinary appreciation, understanding, and shared practice. We give testimony, in spite of the many challenges we continue to navigate, to there being significant potential for growth, development, and scholarship and practice within the context of mainstream education and professional work and learning contexts. With this said, we are not naïve to the mounting pressures to commodify and quantify adult education to fit more neatly and succinctly into the emerging corporate and employment-ready agendas that continue to receive funding and other forms of support from governments and from business and industry. This threat is real, not imagined. We argue, however, that it is in response to these challenging times that we need to consider how we might contribute to a more harmonic discourse that focuses on adult learning within diverse contexts, rather than sustaining the cacophony, the dissonance that, more often than not, positions adult educators and faculty members located within K-12 education at opposite ends of a continuum. In this way, we continue to embrace a more altruistic vision and intention to infuse an alternative worldview within a university work and learning culture that is increasingly focused on a training and economic growth agenda. Cunningham (1993) encouraged adult educators *not* to be neutral. She spoke of a need to upset the dominant hegemony by “challeng[ing] power relationships by developing new ways of relating to one another, by introducing and validating other ways of knowing, by putting our privilege up for analysis and for extinction, and by having as our educational agenda democratic social change” (p. 15). Our experience in leading the development of a core course in a pre-service teacher education program has taught us that we can take up Cunningham’s invitation while actively participating in mainstream and professional education programs. We have found that dialogue with others provides a pathway that honours diversity of perspective and practice and that, beyond our differences, we also share common ground.

Conclusion

In this paper we revisited and relocated our own experiences of transition as an adult education specialization in response to an invitation to engage in an undergraduate pre-service teacher education program. We did this against the backdrop of change that universities are undergoing in Canada and beyond. While there is the distinct fear and possibility of adult education programs being swallowed up, as evidenced by other adult education specializations that have lost their space and place within their universities, we also see tremendous potential in stepping out from the margins, albeit into spaces that are often uncomfortable and unfamiliar.

As we reflect on developing and delivering the PDLL course, we are reminded that the margins can become too comfortable and secure. The notion of being marginalized carries a shadow dimension, not unlike that of the identity of an alternative child, of sorts. Extending this to the identity of adult educators, the tension is that, if we fail to pay attention or surrender our place in the margins, we run the risk of being diluted and instrumentalized. From an alternative perspective, maintaining the posture of rebel/radical ensures the preservation of a critical voice; this posture holds some degree of power and identity. If adult education is instrumentalized into mainstream education, adult educators may be reduced to a human resource training and development and/or vocationalized role and focus. We assert that another perspective is warranted, one that understands and appreciates adult education work and adult learning through a more holistic and inclusive lens.

Simply put, as long as we perpetuate dichotomies, we run the risk of sustaining the very margins we find ourselves criticizing and reacting to as adult educators. If adult education relocates from the margins, lingering questions include: What will adult educators need to surrender or compromise in the process? Who and what keeps adult education in the margins? Indeed, landscapes in faculties of education continue to shift, and neo-liberal trends influencing the work of educators who reside there clearly exist. How do adult educators navigate this challenging landscape without risking the loss of identity and critical voice? From another perspective, are there not valuable opportunities, by stepping beyond these margins of comfort and familiarity, to make significant contributions to a shift in thinking within traditional educational systems, work and learning contexts, and some of the structures that support these systems?

Indeed, as universities increasingly reflect societal neo-liberal policies and the push toward globalization, our own places of work and learning have become the new frontier for adult educators and adult learners.

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