

Editorial: Keeping Our Bearings

By now, we are all familiar with the oft-stated comment that adult education transpires in a multitude of contexts, far more pervasive and diverse than any traditional conception of teaching and learning in schools. Occasionally, however, when confronted with actual evidence of this plenitude, it is difficult not to be taken aback. As I assembled the varied pieces of this particular issue, I was amazed once again with the complexity of adult education. As the articles and reviews of this issue attest, no matter the social issue, an adult educator always seems close by, raising questions, organizing events, putting technology to service, or just thinking deeply.

The vast mandate of our field, the sheer complexity and pervasiveness of its engagements, is a boon and, I would argue, a bit of a challenge. It is a boon because of the great opportunities adult education provides us for work. Everywhere an adult educator turns, there is something meaningful to do. We do not live in a world of predictable events. Increasingly, when existing knowledge is inadequate or overwhelmed by an issue, adults need to overcome their typical ways of thinking and to learn in critical and creative ways. The critical turn in our understanding of adult education, I suggest, makes it an especially valuable social practice.

The challenge, of course, is to keep our bearings in a field whose scope is so rapidly expanding. The increasing breadth of our engagements makes it difficult for adult educators to concentrate their theories and practices, to winnow good ideas from bad, or to develop agreed upon professional norms (politically fraught as these always are even in contexts of relative calm). The danger that confronts a field that reaches so far and that contains such diversity of thought and action is the tendency gives up taking sides, making claims, asserting values, or challenging unfounded beliefs or practices. Adopting a relativist pluralism point of view can lead unhelpfully to diffuse conceptions of what is true, right or good, including what we believe adult education is and should be for.

The solution, here, is not to throw up our hands and say that “everyone has a right to their own opinion.” When it comes to making public claims or engaging in public actions, we must work to justify the validity of knowledge and deeds, avoiding, of course, any positivist belief in some kind of absolute truth. As for the theories and practices of adult education, there remains plenty of room for critical conversations that sort ideas, challenge falsehoods, and develop new, well-considered theories and practices. There is, in short, good reason for advanced scholarship that helps make sense of the complexity of the role of adult education in shifting times.

So, while I continue to be amazed at the complexity of our vocation, I am also deeply pleased when I encounter thoughtful, well-researched, and provocative scholarship that aims to enhance our understanding of the potentials and limitations of adult education. At the same time as the contributors to this issue convey, once again, the richness of adult education’s engagements, they do so with critical sensibilities that strengthen the coherency of the theories and practices of our field.

For example, in her contribution, Carol Roy demonstrates how critical adult education provides a useful lens through which to examine film festivals. Whereas some film festival organizers evince dispositions consistent with the norms of critical adult education (especially, an eye to the potential of film to enhance the deep learning of festival participants that can lead to emancipatory thought and action), other organizers exhibit dispositions

based on very different norms focused, for example, on enhancing the profitability of the film industry. Roy argues that the norms of critical adult education can help challenge organizers to focus on the emancipatory learning potential of film festivals.

In the first of two French language papers in this issue, Audrey Dahl also reveals the potential of critical adult education to enhance learning, this time with teachers responsible for computer education in Canada and Africa. Rather than relying on traditional methods, volunteer adult educators drew on Paulo Freire’s pedagogy to help build critical communities of practice amongst teachers responsible for computer education. All too often, information communication technologies are taught as if they are separate from the broader influences of social power in our society. Approaching computer teaching in a critical fashion is crucial, in Canada and abroad.

Again, with an eye to expanding our sense of the reach of adult education theories and practice, Robert McGray offers a penetrating analysis of the response of select Canadian newspapers to the 2012 Quebec tuition protests. Instead of reporting on the substantial issue of educational retrenchment at the focus of the protests, McGray reveals how Canadian newspapers focused, instead, on the protest organizers, infantilizing them and calling into question the realistic nature of their concerns in light of the hard realities of debt politics. True to their neoliberal leanings, the newspapers deployed the old rhetorical strategy of *ad hominum* attack in an attempt to dampen the emancipatory learning potential of the protests.

In their contribution to this issue, Maryse Potvin, Jacques Lavoie, Julie Larochelle-Audet and Christiane Hamel provide a careful study of the effects of several initiatives in Quebec to enhance the learning of young immigrants. In addition to a rather poignant picture they paint of the struggles many young immigrants face when they come to Canada, Potvin *et al* highlight the important role adult education can play in helping young adults forge meaningful lives for themselves in their new home. Substantial qualitative studies like these continue to reveal the best ways adult education can work to support the learning of this all too often neglected part of our society.

In the final article of this issue, Darlene Clover and Fatma Dogus explore the exciting pedagogical potentials of an event called the *Human Library Project* (HL), in which a learner, in this case called a “Reader,” is paired with a “Living Book,” typically a person from a context outside of the experience of the Reader. The intention of these events is to foster opportunities for conversation leading to mutual learning and understanding. Clover and Dogus investigated an HL event hosted by an art gallery in Victoria and, in their article, report, with a measured degree of enthusiasm, about the potential of the approach. Although museums and art galleries are often seen as rather staid, mainstream institutions in support of adult learning, Clover and Fatma argue that approaches like HL have to potential to enhance the critical adult education capacities of these old institutions.

Overseen by our Book Review Editor, Nancy Tabler, this issue rounds out with an array of excellent reviews that convey, once again the incredible reach and complexity of our field. Nancy has decided, after many very successful issues, to step down as Book Review Editor. I would like to thank her for her excellent editorial work over the past few years.