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PATHWAYS OF ADULT LEARNING: PROFESSIONAL AND EDUCATION NARRATIVES

Janet Groen and Colleen Kawalilak. Canadian Scholars' Press, Toronto, 2014, 249 pages.

Janet Groen and Colleen Kawalilak, colleagues for the past 10 years, begin this enjoyable, conversational text by inviting the reader to participate in a dialogue about adult learners in educational and professional contexts. The text reads very much like a conversation between the authors and the various students and academics whose narratives and perspectives are woven throughout the chapters. This tone is intentional, as Groen and Kawalilak “are committed to creating a space that invites personal reflection” (p. viii). The authors acknowledge at the outset that it is impossible to cover all of the adult education work being done in Canada and that not all perspectives can be considered within one text, but the overall aim of the text is to include stories and voices from the field so that the reader may draw connections between theoretical concepts and the various contexts of lifelong adult learning.

This accessible text is organized into four clear sections: Pathways of Learning: Interpreting Our Story; Philosophy and History: Navigating the Landscape; Learning about Learning: Exploring the Terrain; and Contexts and Praxis: Engaging in Learning. The first section begins by acknowledging the diverse nature of both adult learning and adult learners, spanning informal learning, formal learning, workplace or professional contexts, community-based learning, and volunteer learning. To give voice to the diversity of learning pathways, both authors share an overview of their life histories as impacting their learning trajectories. These narratives provide an opportunity to explore and reflect on learning and the socio-cultural factors that impact lifelong and lifewide learning pathways. Here they clearly define key terms and open the conversation to include snippets from academics and graduate students, again creating the feel of a roundtable discussion. Kawalilak's definition of the dialogical process as a “never ending river...a search for mutual, meaningful understanding rather than the attainment of consensus or truth” (p. 13) is aptly used here to describe the tone of the remaining chapters.

In the second section, Groen and Kawalilak explore the history and philosophies of adult education, with the understanding that our personal philosophy of education reflects our values and experiences and provides us with an anchor from which to base our teaching and learning processes. The traditional philosophical orientations of liberalism, progressivism, behaviourism, humanism, and radicalism are briefly explored, including key themes, theorists, and critiques. The conversation then turns to so-called emerging philosophical orientations focusing on the neo-Marxist and Frankfurt School contributions to critical theory, post-modern and post-structural orientations, and the diverse body of

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work that falls under feminist perspectives. The authors are careful to identify the Western orientation of these philosophies, so the diverse ontological and epistemological traditions of knowing and being from other cultures and parts of the world are not covered here. We must, therefore, acknowledge the situatedness of our teaching and learning philosophies and frameworks.

The third section includes a review of what Groen and Kawalilak refer to as the “big four” adult learning theories: andragogy, self-directed learning, experiential learning, and transformative learning. This exploration highlights the evolution of adult learning theories as the focus has shifted from “isolated individual learners who systematically reflect in a linear fashion on [their] experiences” (p. 159) to learners as embedded in complex relationships with themselves, others, socio-cultural contexts, and the planet as a whole. Groen and Kawalilak beautifully balance the cognitive learning theories with the holistic nature of learning that includes emotions and spirituality and occurs through dance, art, play, and music, among other experiences.

Finally, the fourth section asks questions of work and learning and how we as learners locate ourselves within the wide interpretations of what constitutes “work”—formal, informal, professional, non-profit, community contexts, etc. The current focus on professionalization and marketplace values means that formal work contexts are typically privileged over community-based, informal, and volunteer settings. However, unpaid work in particular contributes significantly to society, community development, and the economy.

Groen and Kawalilak conclude with a look at some of the recent trends and shifts in adult education, particularly technology and the vast impact of social media, distance learning, and MOOCs on the landscape of teaching and learning. These changes will continue to impact learning contexts immensely, but we cannot forget to continually ask critical questions of ourselves in connection to power and privilege, knowledge that is valued, inclusivity and respect in work and learning, and the further democratization of adult education. This critical approach has deep roots in the field of adult education and is important for our moving forward in this global, digital, and interconnected world.

Accessible, clear, and thoroughly enjoyable to read, this text provides an overview of the field of adult education—the history, philosophy, and theoretical orientations—and the connection between work and learning contexts. The authors acknowledge the Western orientation of the theories presented, and certainly there is room for more representation of diversity, reflecting contexts of gender, race, culture, ability, and sexual orientation. The inclusion of narratives from both established academics and theorists as well as graduate students supports the conversational tone of the chapters while also enforcing the authors’ statements that “*we are all adult learners*” (p. vii, emphasis in original) and that “our narratives as lifelong adult learners are, indeed, a work in progress!” (p. 230). This text would be of interest to most working in the field of adult education, for both students and scholars, for all of us as lifelong adult learners.

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