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EMBRACING CHANGE: CONVERSATIONS ABOUT
ADULT EDUCATION AND ACTIVISM THROUGH
AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

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EMBRACING CHANGE: CONVERSATIONS ABOUT ADULT EDUCATION AND ACTIVISM THROUGH AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

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Abstract

Carole and Cindy first met at a conference on transformative learning, By the People, at Arizona State University in December 2015. That meeting and many others that followed (usually in conjunction with Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education) have brought about vibrant conversations about activism, adult learning, and community work. These conversations have served as a catalyst for the telling and analysis of our varied life stories. Through this special issue we share some of our journeys and those of other adult educators from North America.

Résumé

Carole et Cindy se sont premièrement rencontrées lors d'un congrès sur l'apprentissage transformationnel, le « By The People Conference » (« Congrès par le peuple »), à l'Arizona State University (décembre 2015). Cette rencontre et toutes celles qui ont suivies (normalement en lien avec l'ACÉÉA) ont souvent occasionné des échanges stimulants sur le militantisme, l'apprentissage des adultes et le travail communautaire. Ces discussions ont servi de catalyseur au partage et à l'analyse de nos différentes histoires de vie. Dans ce numéro spécial, nous partageons des éléments de nos parcours et de ceux d'autres spécialistes en éducation des adultes de l'Amérique du Nord.

We are delighted to present this collection of stories by adult educators as they explore their scholarship and activism through autoethnography. Our call for papers resulted in a number of interesting proposals, and we had a difficult task selecting only a few articles to fit the space in the journal's special issue—autoethnography is more popular than we anticipated! In this special issue, we highlight adult educators reflecting on practices in formal, non-formal, and informal settings. Our interest stems from the crucial role reflective practice plays in facilitating learning and research in adult learning. We have used

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autoethnography in our research and found it a powerful process to critically reflect on the personal and professional history of our engagement in various movements for social, political, and ecological justice.

Reflective practice has gained much attention in the last couple of decades, perhaps in light of bearing witness to several serious crises, from climate change, growing inequalities, violence, and genocide to a lack of affordable housing, faltering health care systems across Canada, increased addictions, an aging population, and so on. Faced with such a magnitude of problems, a reflective practice, individually and collectively, can provide a means to remain grounded in values and approaches that foster creativity, criticality, and courage. A critical and reflective approach must be seen not as a luxury, but as a requirement for engaged adult educators and activists who need to sustain themselves and the various projects they are involved in over the long term.

Contrary to expectations, autoethnography is not focused on the self, but on one's practice. While it includes autobiographical analysis, it goes beyond telling one's story to analyzing cultural, social, and political factors within a specific historical period. A search of the term *autoethnography* in prominent adult education journals revealed articles in the *Adult Education Quarterly* (Brooks, 2018), *Studies in the Education of Adults* (Chapman, 2003; Dempsey, 2023; McCormack, 2016; Toynton, 2006), and *International Journal of Lifelong Education* (Bates & Wright, 2019; Costello, 2013; Hunt, 2009; Miles et al., 2019; Taber, 2018). A review of *Reflective Practice* for the past ten years showed 24 articles focused on autoethnographies. Finally, an additional search under the subheading *education* in *SAGE Journals* for the past ten years identified 100+ articles; however, many focused on subjects not directly relevant to adult education—namely early childhood education (9), research methodology (32), health (13), general topics (18), and ethnography (15), which left 17 articles (about 10%) dealing with aspects relevant to adult education, such as human resources management and transformative education. A search with the term *autoethnography* in *CJSAE* found only two articles (Grover, 2021; Johnson, 2019). While there has been an increase in articles focusing on autoethnography in journals relevant to adult education, that focus is not yet reflected in *CJSAE*. This special issue begins to fill this gap at a time when critical self-reflection is increasingly important for adult educators, who are often engaged in education for social and environmental awareness and change. Autoethnographies can encourage critical thinking and broaden our worldview. At this time, when we are faced with serious challenges, critical self-reflection can stimulate hope, openness, and individual and collective visioning for preferred futures. Inspiration comes from people who, at the edges of their wisdom, communicate their experience.

This collection includes Carole Roy's reflection on a long-distance peace march—a reflection that led to greater understanding of her motivation and a recognition of the long-term impact events during the peace march had on her academic studies and, ultimately, on her career. She also indicates that an open and welcoming atmosphere might help in building social movements. Cindy Hanson shares how her activism is lifelong and was integrated into major components of her life story and research. She explores various notions of solidarity, feminism, and community-based research through stories about mothers on social assistance, co-op youth programs, Indigenous alliances, Tools for Peace, working in global zones of conflict, and more. Melissa Granovsky writes about how a focus on autoethnography and arts-making during her master's research revealed her Métis and Jewish history, and how the process of arts creation contributed to her ability to understand

so many different aspects of herself and her practice. Kevin and Cynthia Collins present a duo-ethnography, as they have been collaborating in all aspects of an arts practice that involves creating giant puppets for their community-based activism. Kevin focused on that very dynamic practice in his doctoral thesis. Finally, Audrey Dahl and Renee Jackson explore duo-ethnography as they describe their participation in the 2012 Maple Spring student protest in Quebec. They examine issues involved with collective decision making and individual reactions, and review their experiences ten years later, offering an original text that alternates between French and English. Overall, this collection aspires to contribute to the documentation effort called for at different times (for example, in Hall, 1996, 2001; Butterwick, 2016). We hope that this may encourage others to explore their own stories and write autoethnographies in order to add their experiences as adult educators and as activists. Those coming after us should not be left wondering if we cared, or if we ever did anything to promote change toward peace, justice, and ecological respect.

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