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EDITORIAL

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EDITORIAL: INTRODUCTION TO THE THEMED ISSUE OF ADULT EDUCATION AND SUSTAINABILITY

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Abstract

As humans on a finite planet, we are facing an interconnected set of existential issues: climate change, war, displacement, and widespread precarity. In this context, sustainability may appear a distant goal that we will never reach. However, the history of adult education shows that adults continue to learn, even in the face of great adversity. Learning sustainability involves a pedagogy of hope that calls on all of us to become both educators and learners, working together toward a more sustainable world.

Résumé

Comme êtres humains sur une planète limitée, nous sommes confrontés à un éventail de problèmes interconnectés : le changement climatique, la guerre, les déplacements et la précarité généralisée. Dans ce contexte, la durabilité peut sembler un objectif éloigné que nous n'atteindrons jamais. Cependant, l'histoire de l'éducation des adultes montre que ceux-ci continuent d'apprendre, même face à une grande adversité. L'apprentissage durable s'effectue grâce à une pédagogie fondée sur l'espoir exigeant que nous soyons tous éducateurs et apprenants pour ainsi travailler ensemble vers un monde plus durable.

Keywords

adult education, hope, relationality, sustainability, transformative learning

Mots clés

éducation des adultes, espoir, relations, durabilité, apprentissage transformatif

In their seminal text on Canadian adult education, Brigham et al. (2021) argued that "adult education can be seen as the development and enactment of knowledges and practices that make a difference to individuals, social groups, communities, and/or society at large" (p. x). In a world facing existential issues such as climate change, the rise of

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authoritarianism, and the yawning gap between rich and poor, some of the knowledges and practices that can make a difference coalesce around the concept of sustainability.

The word *sustainability* entered the English language in the 1970s as a response to the human destruction of the environment, which Common (1995) referred to as "the nexus between economic activity and the natural environment" (p. 4). Before that time, he claimed, sustainability was not an explicit goal but certainly an implicit one because no society had ever consciously promoted its own unsustainability. From this original association with environmental issues, sustainability expanded to encompass social and economic issues, although there is no academic justification for such a tripartite classification (Purvis et al., 2019). More recently, it has included cultural issues, reflecting the importance of culture to the sustainability of Indigenous ways of life.

Given that we are facing rampant unsustainability in the form of climate destabilization, water scarcity, plastic pollution, uncontrollable wildfires, income disparity, ultra-processed food, neocolonization, growing polarization, and escalating discrimination, it is increasingly clear that sustainability is one of the great adult education projects of our time. And yet, sustainability does not come naturally to human beings—it must be learned (Sumner, 2016). This learning needs to be life-wide and lifelong in order to mitigate the worst effects and potential threats to human and more-than-human health, well-being, and survival from the repercussions of living unsustainably (O'Connor & Kenter, 2019; Yin et al., 2023). Adults can learn sustainability in many places through formal, informal, and non-formal means, whether at home, at work, while travelling, in communities, online, in educational institutions, through land-based pedagogies, via policy documents, or in urban and rural settings. Unfortunately, people may often resist making the changes to more sustainable ways of living and working for fear of loss and the implications of scarcity (McCowen, 2023). Can adult education challenge assumptions and overcome resistance while transforming and creating more compelling narratives and engagement in learning sustainability?

We think it can, in spite of the absence of an accepted definition of sustainability. Instead, there are vague descriptions that carry warm and fuzzy connotations. Indeed, O'Riordan (1988) once claimed that the concept of sustainability was "deliberately vague . . . so that endless streams of academics and diplomats could spend many comfortable hours trying to define it without success" (p. 37). The authors in this themed issue have not spent many comfortable hours trying to define sustainability. Instead, they have diligently and creatively explored some of the sustainability knowledges and practices that make a difference in the lives of adults.

Elizabeth Lange and ***Shandell Houlden*** begin the issue by reconceiving community adult education in the service of sustainable and regenerative futures. Using transition design and relationality theory, they employ two case studies to highlight pedagogy as a vehicle for the transition toward the Symbiocene era. They put forward three pedagogical pathways—the power of story, connecting individual and community needs, and fostering kinship with the natural world—that encourage adults to overcome resistance and create openness to civic engagement. These pathways lead to what Lange and Houlden refer to as *worldmaking*, prefiguring a new world where we can design ourselves back into the dance of life.

Sheena Cameron continues with the theme of community adult education in her article that focuses on transformative adult learning in the climate/environmental justice

movement in Wabanaki Territory. Her research highlights the importance of relationships as resistance and illustrates the transformative learning that happened through relationships forged within these movement struggles. Cameron suggests that this transformative learning requires being unsettled. Speaking from her position as a white settler woman, Cameron encourages other white settlers to engage in ongoing reflection and unlearning to comprehend how their relationships with others and the earth, and their actions, have impacted the climate crisis. Cameron considers this process, which can be seen as part of learning to think more sustainably, as lifelong learning and unlearning, which she argues is required for collective survival.

Mengyuan Guo proposes bringing Confucian principles into adult education for sustainability to foster a more holistic understanding of the term. Guo shows how the philosophical tenets of Confucianism, which include cultivating love, care, and a sense of companionship with nature, can enrich adult education for sustainability and address contemporary global sustainability challenges. This synthesis of Confucianism, adult education, and sustainability is a compelling reminder of the interdisciplinary nature of adult education and the need to explore and appreciate other ways of thinking, being, and doing if we are to learn how to live more sustainably.

In their case study about the informal learning experiences of participants at a wild food festival, ***Ingrid Kajzer Mitchell*** and ***Will Low*** propose that food festivals have the potential to foster a range of informal adult learning processes, both incidental and intentional. They argue that these processes, in turn, can be precursors to transformative learning by opening up opportunities to learn about alternative, more sustainable, ways of living.

Blandine Tchamou contributes a reflection on practice in which she shares her personal experiences and observations from her research concerning appropriate waste management solutions. As a newcomer to North America, Tchamou reflects on the question of waste management and the problem of littering, which she observes is apparent in every country.

Shauna Butterwick provides two book reviews to complete the themed issue. She looks at *Unsettling Spirit: A Journey into Decolonization* (2020) by Denise Nadeau and *Transformative Sustainability Education: Reimagining Our Future* (2023) by Elizabeth Lange, texts that complement and contribute to the ideas surrounding adult education for sustainability that have already emerged in this issue. Butterwick's comments and reflections, and the books themselves, will enrich adult educators' perceptions of the challenges and opportunities in learning to think and live more sustainably.

This themed issue continues the tradition of addressing the interface of adult education and sustainability, which has antecedents in scholars like David Orr and Isagani Serrano, and can be found in the work of Canadian adult educators such as Elizabeth Lange, Darlene Clover, Budd Hall, Pierre Walter, Spring Gillard, and Robert Van Wynsberghe. This tradition also encompasses the work of Indigenous academics such as Dan Shilling, Gregory Cajete, and Robin Wall Kimmerer, who teach us about traditional ecological knowledge, relationality, native science, and reciprocity. We hope that the issue honours this tradition by nurturing continued reflection, sparking dialogue throughout the field, and inspiring innovation in the ways adults learn to see, think, and conceptualize sustainability.

Sustainability education in all forms is a rapidly growing area of research and

scholarship, with interdisciplinary relevance for pedagogy and practice in the field of adult education and beyond. At a time when environmental, social, economic, and cultural issues are garnering greater public concern, adult education has an enormous role to play in providing pedagogical guidance and support for the future. This themed issue is a call to action for the adult education community to envision how their research, teaching, and practice can do more to foster sustainable ways of knowing and being in the world.

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