

## Articles

# FALLING INTO THE COMPANY OF ADULT EDUCATORS: TRAVELS WITH CASAE

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### Abstract

*In this memorial reflection, I consider my own research and inquiries within the turbulent history of CASAE.*

### Résumé

*Dans cette réflexion mémorial, je considère mes propres enquêtes et recherches au sein de l'histoire mouvementée du CASAE*

Alan Thomas, that elegant proponent of learning at all costs, once told me a story when I first started hanging around adult education professors. He said that E. A. (Ned) Corbett, the first director of the Canadian Association of Adult Education (CAAE), had informed him that he had simply fallen into the company of adult educators. During my doctoral studies in educational history at UBC's Department of Educational Studies, I, too, accidentally fell into the company of adult educators. I had written a long essay on social progressives and curricular reform for Dr. George Tomkins, and was searching for a dissertation topic. Surely, I thought, there must be evidence of radical curricular thought in our past. Tomkins thought radical thinking was but faintly present in the history of schooling, but knew of Watson Thomson, who was definitely an educational radical of some sort. Thomson's papers were available in the UBC Archives, conveniently enough. So I set off on a journey that would profoundly shape my professional and personal life. Strange as this may seem, I had very little contact with the adult education unit, then located on the eastern edge of the university campus in its own little building. The only person I had contact with toward the end of my studies was Kjell Rubenson, freshly arrived from Sweden with a way of mapping adult education that clashed with the predominant ethos of UBC at the time.

I tracked Watson Thomson through archives right across the country. I loved the detective work. As I followed Thomson's trail, it dawned on me that something pretty big had occurred in Canada from the 1920s to the 1950s. Thomson was arguably one of the most passionate of the adult educators who worked during the activist era. These "social reconstructionist" adult educators were the cutting edge of the adult education movement

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in the 1930s and 1940s. My search for Thomson, who had almost disappeared from historical memory, both in general histories of Canadian socialism and in the legacy of adult education, had opened a vast and intricate network of "education for transformation" from coast to coast. It did not take much imagination to realize that this burning ember of social justice at the heart of Canadian adult education had become a smoldering ember. A whole marvelous world just waiting to be uncovered awaited me. But when I arrived at Dalhousie University in Halifax in 1983 to begin teaching graduate students adult education at the beginning of the neo-conservative era (Mulroney had just been elected in Canada and Reagan ruled in the United States, and Thatcher was but four years from her anointing), I had not taken a single professional course in the discipline of adult education. I was not even certain such a thing existed, and had to scramble to figure it out.

A student would knock on my door. "Dr. Welton, I would like to know about self-directed learning. Can you tell me something?" I didn't know what it was. Rubenson had given me some tips; I had his 1982 paper on mapping the territory in hand (and several others, too, including an obscure Swedish critique of Alan Tough's research) to get me started. Some prominent members of the Canadian and American Commission of Professors didn't think I should have been hired; they may have been right. But I thought that my own passionate interests in Western Marxism (Karl Korsch, Georg Lukács, Antonio Gramsci, Jürgen Habermas, and Ernst Bloch) and liberation theology and my knowledge of radical intellectual and educational history could be brought into play in my work with graduate students in the Maritimes. My first public lecture in Halifax shortly after arriving—"Lifelong, Life-wide and Just: The Challenge for Adult Education"—didn't meet with resounding cheers. I found the local adult education/continuing education crowd conservative and unimaginative. Still, I pressed on; surely the cozy archives of Fathers Jimmy Tompkins and Moses Coady would be compensation for unfriendly reception.

In this memorial reflection, I would like to consider my own research and inquiry within the turbulent history of the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education (CASAE). Early in my professional journey, I believed that CASAE was an essential place to shape the discipline on the forge of collective intellectual effort. Many papers that I wrote, whether about work or social movements, were attempts to demonstrate to myself and colleagues how we might begin to think our way toward a new paradigm. Mike Newman (2003) thinks this work has four strands. Each of these strands in its own way contributes to understanding how to think about adult learning. The first involved recovering liberatory moments in the history of Canadian adult education in the 19th and 20th centuries. Much of my work focused on the Antigonish Movement. In the second strand, I examined current social and community action in Canada. I looked at the struggle for decent living and working conditions, and for equity and social justice, both in the modern workplace and in local urban community contexts. My first research venture had been to uncover previously hidden social movement currents (gathered around Thomson). Later, I examined modern society as it manifested itself in industry and modern social movements such as the women's movement and the environmental movement. I also looked at ways these different congregations of people could be used as sites of learning that will bring about beneficial social change.

In a third strand, I searched for a theoretical construct to explain the way learning is integral to social and community action. It is in this strand that I tried to relate critical learning to political learning, writing articles and chapters that examined Habermas's ideas on the generation of knowledge and on the conditions for the ideal speech act. In writing about critical theory, I consciously sought (along with others, like Donovan Plumb and Mike Collins) to counteract the emphases on the instrumental or the entirely personal in much of the writing on adult education in the 1970s, '80s, and '90s. And in the fourth strand, I spent much energy examining the concepts of the system, civil society, and the lifeworld. Here, I went beyond the examination of local action or particular social movements to a more comprehensive social analysis. My concept of civil society subsumed local action and individual social movements into an idea of representation, resistance, and action that incorporates a vast array of ordinary communal activities. I have always been concerned to understand how we give meaning to our lives through various forms of representation and organizations, and how we engage in and conduct learning within these different but intersecting spheres of daily existence. My last book, *Designing the just learning society: a critical inquiry* (2005) tried to synthesize work and thinking of the previous decades. It emerged out of teaching graduate courses at Mount Saint Vincent, where Plumb and I had tried to build a model graduate program based on the critical theoretical framework of Jürgen Habermas (Plumb & Welton, 2001).

When I started attending meetings of the fledgling CASAE in the early 1980s, it became painfully evident that the Montreal meeting in May 1985 revealed considerable unease within the professoriate of adult education. The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) had just had its PhD program revoked on the grounds that professional publications were not "academically respectable." The Adult Education Department at UBC, then warily nestled within the Department of Administrative, Adult and Higher Education, appeared to be in danger of dissolving into the muddy sea of the Faculty of Education. And the third major centre of graduate adult education at the University of Montreal was also in danger of losing its autonomy. I wondered what was happening. Were adult education professors failed academics? Did we need radically new paradigms of constituting the discipline? These and other questions nipped at our heels through this meeting. A circle-the-wagons mentality and beleaguered mood prevailed.

I responded to this perceived crisis in CASAE with the paper, "'Vivisecting the Nightingale': Reflections on Adult Education as an Object of Study" (presented at CASAE in 1986 and published in 1987). I took cues from Rubenson's (1982) seminal essay, "Adult Education Research: In Quest of a Map of the Territory," and the British theorist, Colin Griffin (1983) to link the critically oriented practice and plain discourse of public intellectuals in the 1930s and 1940s with theoretical reflection that might clear the path for new ways of understanding our situation in the late 20th century. Familiar with critical pedagogical reproduction and social control theories, I had learned to think of education as a social reproductive enterprise, primarily from Samuel Bowles and Herb Gintis (1976) and the educational historian Michael Katz (1968, 1971). In this paper, I tried—not entirely successfully—to make the case for adult learning as essential to the dynamic processes of social reproduction, resistance, and transformation. This theoretical approach turned away from finding adult education's distinctiveness in method, knowledge form, or ideology

of needs and provision. One cannot imagine any other intellectual arena where this paper would have made any sense at all.

Work in the Syracuse University Archives in the late 1980s (I was a participant in the Kellogg Foundation–sponsored conferences on the history of adult education) had unearthed transcripts of the first meetings of the American Commission of Professors in the mid-1950s. There, the luminaries of the American adult education scene (Malcolm Knowles, Cyril Houle, Sandy Liveright, Coolie Verner, and many others) and several Canadians (J. Roby Kidd and Alan Thomas) deliberated about how to create a discipline of adult education. Reading the transcript of the Friday afternoon meeting, April 26, 1956 (Knowles, 1957), I believed I had found an important clue to understanding why CASAE was having a difficult time establishing itself on a solid foundation. I discovered that American thinking about how adult education ought to be studied profoundly influenced Canadian thinking in its professionalization phase. For one thing, the individualism of American thinking rested uneasily with Canadian collective orientations to the world. For another, Canadian adult educators had not repressed their own critical traditions as resolutely as the Americans had.

The text is fascinating; essentially, the professors were trying to figure out how they could constitute adult education as an academic discipline. The majority of them thought that adult education was to be a professional field of practice that had to be separated from the educational preparation of children. The medical professional field of practice was the model to emulate; behavioural psychology the scientific discipline to ground its practice. Malcolm Knowles's famous andragogical model grew out of these deliberations. Knowles knew that the term had been used before, but he popularized it in order to create the basis for a place within the academy. This model—the andragogical consensus—had variants, including that of Coolie Verner. He knew what was at stake in his UBC environ in the late 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, and argued that adult education was the activity and practice of professionally educated persons who studied the psychology of the adult learner, program planning, and the methods and techniques appropriate to the individual adult learner's needs. This radically individualistic model was shaped—I believe—to create a high status professional field of practice that could be clearly identified as something unique, distinct alongside the growing professional specialties in the ever-diversifying university.

The men (and one woman, Rose Cologne) who deliberated in 1956 were aware that adult learning did occur outside Verner's professionalized charts and boxes. The Canadians—Kidd and Thomas, particularly—had intellectual and practical links with the social reconstructionist, activist adult education prior to WWII. But when Kidd began the OISE adult education program in the late 1960s, the fires of social activism had cooled considerably. Many adult educators on the left (Watson Thomson, Harry Avison, Stanley Rands, Drummond Wren [of the Workers' Educational Association], and John Grierson [of the National Film Board]) were accused of being communists and run out of adult education work. Thus, a professionalized model (play down the social movement history, play up the respectability of adult educators who had methods and would travel) fit well with the Cold War ethos of the times. Kidd's core empirical researcher, Alan Tough, studied "learning projects" designed by the lonely individual. The heart of the program was the traditional, plain andragogical fare of program planning and learning theory with a psychological bent,

with Virginia Griffin spicing things up with experiential inquiries. Thomas's approach to learning, while opening up areas disclosed for research within the andragogical paradigm, remained resolutely attached to liberal individualism. Perhaps the faint traces of the social reconstructionists were still present in Kidd's encouragement of historical research and James Draper's community development interests. But the houses that Kidd and Verner built were essentially constructed from the wood pile of the andragogical premises of adult education's professionalizing phase. One cannot understand the evolution and internal tensions within CASAE without knowing this history.

In retrospect, critical theory's movement into CASAE was rocky and tumultuous. As the new kid on the block, it edged its way uneasily into andragogical territory. At the Montreal CASAE conference in 1985, after a panel discussion on "New Perspectives on the History of Adult Education," one professor spoke to me. He said, "I know what you are. You're a communist." That was a little unsettling. I recall other meetings where the inimitable New Zealander Michael Law thundered out in defence of Marxist orientations to adult learning. At the 1992 meeting held in Saskatoon, a panel discussion on the new "black book" edited by Peter Jarvis and John Peters (1991) was basically shouted down as members in the audience railed against those who had excluded women and blacks from the text. Several panel participants never returned to another Adult Education Research Conference (AERC) or CASAE meeting. Similar explosions were also evident at the Syracuse symposium on workers' education sponsored by the Kellogg Foundation and the critical theory working group within the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE). In July 1995, Michael Collins and his associates at the University of Saskatchewan called a major emergency conference in Canmore, Alberta, to examine the question of the future of adult education as a field of study and practice. Prominent scholars came from Britain, Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and Canada. The mood was even more morose than 10 years earlier. Many were pronouncing the end—Budd Hall and Kathy Rockhill spoke of upheavals and chaos at OISE. I told the gloomy story of how the School of Education had been closed at Dalhousie University. In 2002, in the aftermath of the World Trade Centre towers attack, Shahrzad Mojab and I (with Maliha Chishti as co-participant) organized a session at CASAE on understanding global learning dynamics in our age of "shattered democracies." In the following year, only months after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Mojab, Bruce Spencer, and I organized a further session to address the challenges facing the American Empire in the Middle East. These were tense and harried times as Canadians and Americans struggled to the depths over how we as adult educators could respond to such momentous events. Some Americans were upset over a perceived anti-American bias in Canadian presentations. The tone and tenor of these debates are inconceivable without imagining CASAE as the host.

These anecdotes reflect the struggle and tension within an academic organization that had functioned tacitly within a broad andragogical consensus framework and commitment to professionalized forms of practice. Like an invader from another tribal enclave, various forms of critical theory challenged the major assumptions, categories, and motifs of andragogy. Critical theories explicitly raised hard questions about the accommodation of Canadian adult education and its field of study. The new categories, motifs, and vocabulary certainly reflected upheaval within the existing paradigm—which always occurs when the old one no longer adequately explains the messy world of reality.

The 1991 special issue of *The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education (CJSAE)* on critical theory crystallized some of the thinking that had begun to circulate within CASAE. The appearance of writings on the new social movements by Matthias Finger (1989) and Budd Hall (1979), and Law and Collard's (1989) critique of Jack Mezirow's methodological individualism in the late 1980s signalled new theoretical developments in the study of adult learning. Flashy University of Alberta graduate students Donovan Plumb and Derek Briton (1993a, 1993b) introduced exciting new postmodern theorists (Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Václav Havel) to CASAE in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Feminist themes had been circulating for some time outside adult education, but seeped into the discipline of adult education primarily through Mechthild Hart's (1985, 1990a, 1990b) brilliant writings. Michael Collins (1992) introduced us to the vocational consequences of the radical paradigm and to the enduring worth of Ivan Illich and socialist theorists like Rosa Luxemburg as the dreadful decade of the 1990s dawned. As well, the recovery of the radical workers' movements of early and present day by Bruce Spencer (1994) provided us with a sense of solidity and confidence that a new paradigm could both account for learning occurring in the system and lifeworld domains. We also believed that new theory could engender new ways of teaching adults. Radical forms of adult education arose on the waves of the global uprising. Civil society was the preeminent learning domain—some of us cried out ecstatically. Polish Solidarity and the end of authoritarian communism perked up our spirits and fed our imagination and writing. Alas, we could not foresee September 11, 2001, and the chaos, war, and global misery of the rest of the decade.

The contributors to *In Defense of the Lifeworld: Critical Perspectives on Adult Learning* (1995) all reflected the dialogues and debates occurring in CASAE and other international adult education arenas. Habermas was one of our worthy dialogue partners. However, it needs to be said clearly that the Canadian and international adult education network of professors and researchers contained many exemplary critical voices, speaking with different tonalities and accents as the scholarly world moved into an unnerving postmodern formation. However, I think that the significant shift within the social sciences and humanities from equity to identity has led us to forget political economic forms of analysis of our 21st-century world. Preoccupation with identity has trumped a strong focus on distributive justice. This signals the tragic collapse of the left, which fell apart precisely when the global corporate elites dreamed of transforming the world into a consumer paradise. We have forgotten the crucial analytical and conceptual tools inherited from the Western Marxist tradition to enable us to cut through the miasma surrounding the information society and its grandiose defenders.

The irony of the appearance of the new paradigm simultaneously with the collapse of the old CAEE and the arrival of the tsunami of neo-conservative pressure to harness all forms of learning from child to elder to the Money-code—to radically vocationalize all learning and education—has led to deep confusion within the ever-fragile university departments of education that were being forced to cut back and resituate themselves. The old andragogical paradigm, symbolized in the houses that Kidd and Verner built, had been dismantled. A new paradigm was ready to provide some orientation and passion, but, alas, it was forced into exile, destined to be homeless. The old guard was dismayed and the new critically oriented educators without a place to lay their heads. OISE was

not able to reconfigure itself in the 1990s into a new school of lifelong learning, with a clear and coherent understanding of adult learning as a vibrant discipline providing resources for those working in various sites within an emergent, self-conscious learning society. Rather, it brought together a number of disparate groups, including a few adult educators (and some with that name but without the interest or commitment to the field) into one amorphous unit. UBC, which once held such promise, was unable to reconfigure the discipline for a new day as internal dissention and conflicting visions of adult education sapped its energies. Although I am retired from teaching adult education full time, I think that a university-based discipline of adult learning scarcely exists. Perhaps I see dimly. But it seems that only a relatively small cadre of professors and researchers inhabit whatever space they can. They do so as keepers of critical outposts, insecure spaces for those without an enduring home. They are like lighthouses on stormy coast lines.

Adult educators in the 1950s had a big dream. They imagined they would establish a separate discipline based on unique methods for teaching individual adults in various settings and psychological insights into how individuals learn. But they have had to abandon the dream of monopolizing the scientific and humanist understanding of how and where and why adults learn. As it turns out, many disciplines now share this complex enterprise, often unaware of the fact that they are even studying adult learning. Thus, paradoxically, adult education departments in Canada and the United States—where they exist at all—remain small and often intellectually confused at this precipitous historical moment when the discourse of the learning society has highlighted how central human learning is to all dimensions of human existence and transformative possibilities. After all, the most common name given to our age is the “knowledge” or “information” society.

This attempt to draw a circle around a thing called “adult education” fell apart in the late 20th century. It disintegrated in part because things were moving so fast, things were so fluid and speedy, that our inherited scripts could no longer guide us through the night. We could no longer take for granted that the knowledge and skills of our ancestors would orient us to an ever-changing present. We became conscious of ourselves as persons who were constantly adapting to new learning challenges—in our bodies, minds, and spirits; at work; in civil society’s many domains; in cultural expression and play. The absence of solidity and permanence stripped us down to a core or elemental understanding that learning was our most precious resource.

We have moved full circle from movement to profession to movement. In the 1930s and 1940s, adult educators understood themselves as amateurs out to change the world. They saw themselves as an integral part of the movement for social justice flowing like a river through Canadian society. They did not imagine that adult education could somehow be disconnected from the society and studied as a precious artifact. They were in the river. When Roby Kidd decided to teach a course on adult education in the late 1940s at the Ontario College of Education, Ned Corbett wondered if there was enough material to teach. They were a movement and their innovative thought was oriented to imagining how the projects they were shaping within the overarching vision of a deliberative democratic society could be realized. They did not start with methods; they invented them in the course of confronting the inequities of their society. Coady worried mightily that adult education might end up as a kind of museum piece.

But the arrival into a world conscious of itself as some form of a learning society has not brought justice and peace. One need not rehearse the endless list of troubles in our globalized world. But those of us who believe ardently that the appropriate vision for adult education in the 21st century is to build a just learning society must find the courage and energy to continue to "name the world" (Freire, 1974) for what it is: an unjust learning society. Learning is harnessed to the Money-code. Millions of people are removed from any opportunity to acquire the resources to stand up tall, speak with a strong voice, and engage with others in building islands of justice and peace. Our beloved dialogic learning scarcely exists, either in local forms of civil society or in the geopolitical realms where elites determine the future for us. The wide range of people actually teaching adults in our society (many without even knowing that is what they are doing) must be awakened to see that they are teachers of adults and that the institutions and associations they inhabit can be designed either to foster the development of human well-being or to undermine this very possibility.

Nobody likes moralizing or advice from retired professors. But I am going to suggest in the light of our situation that CASAE consider reimagining itself modestly as a crucial public sphere within the learning society. This would resituate CASAE within the movement for social justice. The idea of a public sphere as a learning site is integral to the critical theory tradition. It also connects profoundly with the great innovations in our emancipatory history as Canadians. I am thinking specifically of the Farm Radio and Citizens' Forums and Watson Thomson's creation of citizens' assemblies as deliberative spaces to engage a wide range of people from government and civil society and movement sectors in a dialogue on the building of the democratic socialist society.

Given the difficult nature of our struggle to create a secure, coherent discipline with a secure home, we might reimagine CASAE as a space dedicated to inviting many different actors in Canadian society to engage in a dialogue about how we can create a just learning society. Rather than simply thinking of CASAE as a space for presenting papers toward professional credit, CASAE might consider creating innovative ways of awakening different sectors to their responsibility to build non-authoritarian learning environments. CASAE would take on as its mission in the next decades not so much the restoration of the vision of the 1950s, but the redirection of intellectual energy to thinking deeply about the way the vision of the just learning society can be kept alive by all members of the society. Our vigorous ideas about the learning dynamics of personal, social, and global transformation would move out of our restricted channels. We could invite participants and thinkers from all walks of life to join us. This mission—the creation not so much of yet another learned society, but rather of a dialogic, deliberative space in our pluralistic world—would mean that CASAE sees itself as hosting the deeply held belief of our forefathers and foremothers that knowledge is power and ignorance is not bliss. In the 21st century, we are not so naïve as to believe that knowledge alone, or the transformation of consciousness by itself, will distribute needed goods to the worst off or not so well off in our society. But we believe that the transformation of consciousness is integral to any form of just practice. As Watson Thomson once said, "No study without action, no action without study."

In its next 30 years, may CASAE thrive as that special place in Canadian society that hosts deliberation on the creation of the just learning society. Let CASAE become a



citizens' assembly for the 21st century. Let people from all walks of life stream in to hosted meetings. I am glad to have fallen into the company of adult educators.

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