

# CASAE/ACÉÉA IN THE GLOBAL NEO-LIBERAL ERA

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## Abstract

*This paper is offered as part of the thirty-year celebration of the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education/l'Association canadienne pour l'Étude de l'Éducation des Adultes (CASAE/ACÉÉA). The paper reviews the contributions of Canadian scholars to our mapping and understanding of work and learning issues, particularly in relation to the dominant neo-liberal economic agenda. The data are essentially drawn from the proceedings of national CASAE/ACÉÉA conferences and from contributions to The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education/la Revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes.*

## Résumé

*Cet article est proposé dans le cadre de la célébration du trentième anniversaire de l'Association canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes/Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education (ACÉÉA/CASAE). Le document passe en revue les contributions des chercheurs canadiens à notre cartographie et compréhension de la question « travail et apprentissage »; plus particulièrement en ce qui a trait à la domination néolibérale de l'agenda économique. Les données sont principalement tirées des comptes-rendus de conférences nationales (ACÉÉA/CASAE) et des contributions de la Revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes.*

## Introduction

The Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education/l'Association canadienne pour l'Étude de l'Éducation des Adultes (CASAE/ACÉÉA) was founded in 1981 at a time when neo-liberal economic policies were in the ascendancy and the importance of the global economy was being trumpeted. At the same time, there was also a vibrant community of adult education scholars, a commitment to support community-based adult education programs, and a celebration of the breadth of what adult education had to offer. The growth

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in graduate work, the numbers employed in the field, and the recognition that Canadian-based scholars of adult education needed a vehicle to discuss issues of common concern led to the founding of CASAE/ACÉÉA thirty years ago and the journal some five years later.

It may not have been so evident at that time, but became so from 1990 on, that one of the main challenges CASAE/ACÉÉA members faced was how to respond to the increasing emphasis on "relevancy," on the idea that adult education should serve the new emphasis on "education for economy," and in particular on creating "knowledge workers" and a knowledgeable workforce. It was expected that adult educators would embrace the view that Canadians needed to accept the mantra that careers and lifetime employment had been replaced by "employment portfolios," "job flexibility," and constant retraining and upgrading. Adult educators were to become the vehicle for delivering this message, and policy and adult education scholars were expected to provide research and education to back up this new emphasis. The purpose of this paper is to map out how CASAE/ACÉÉA members have responded to these pressures by primarily reviewing the association's national conference proceedings and journal articles that deal with issues of work and learning in the broadest definition.

### **The Data**

The data have not been as easy to mine as might be thought; getting a complete collection of journals has been problematic, particularly copies of the earliest issues. The conference proceedings were even more difficult to obtain, as libraries have tended to organize them by the titles of the proceedings, which reflect the varying conference themes, and have not always cross-listed them as produced by CASAE/ACÉÉA. In addition, not all libraries have a collection of proceedings. As it stands we have a near-complete collection of CASAE/ACÉÉA proceedings from 1988 onward, but nothing before that date. There is also the question of joint conferences with AERC and sorting out Canadian presenters from others.

The data have been mapped using a qualitative content analysis to count the appearance and frequency of new and recurring topics related to work and learning. Content analysis allowed us to look across articles in *The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education (CJSAE)* and conference proceedings to identify recurring issues and themes; however, we accept that content analysis that treats texts as transparent is inadequate to reveal all latent meanings of texts. Given more time, a form of critical discourse analysis would take us a little further. As Peter Sawchuk (2011) has noted by using the example of just one category—skill—the field has become complex:

The multi-disciplinarity of the literature has seen a proliferation of identified skill types: from common notions of "soft" and "hard" skills, general education and vocationally specific skills, literacy, communication, comprehension, multi-tasking skills, procedural and declarative knowledge, through to somewhat more theoretically robust formulations of such things as work-related emotional skill, articulation skill, relational skills and aesthetic skill. And, the proliferation (helpful, rhetorical or otherwise) does not end there. (p. 141)

### *The Early Years*

The twin pillars of adult education scholarship in English-speaking Canada have generally been recognized as the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) in Toronto and the adult education program at the University of British Columbia (UBC) in Vancouver. UBC claims to be the first university in Canada to have offered a degree focused on adult education in 1957 (some courses offered through the extension program at UBC were taught by Roby Kidd and Alan Thomas), but it was not until 1960 when Coolie Verner became the founding professor of adult education in the department did we see a growth in graduate studies, and it was not until the 1970s that the total of masters and PhD graduates regularly got into double figures annually (Damer, 2002). Similarly, in Toronto, it was not until after the founding of OISE in 1965 that a regular stream of graduate students with a focus on adult education emerged. It also must be remembered that a number of Canadian-based professors in adult education (in the growing number of departments/groupings of adult education professors located across Canada) came from the United States and maintained U.S. ties, so it took time to create a critical mass of Canadian-based scholars keen to establish a Canadian association (we should not overlook the contributions to the work of the new association of continuing education or extension-based scholars, nor those who worked in further-education institutions such as community colleges, many of whom had graduate degrees from the main universities' new adult education programs).

Some of the early research conducted through these new centres of adult education did focus on aspects of what we can refer to as broadly defined work and learning. It included those focused on human resources/relations/development at work, those looking at training issues or professional education, and a few interested in union education or the history of workers' education. These concerns pre-date the later focus on workplace learning, learning organizations, and critical studies of the excluded and marginalized within national and corporate programs. In the early years of the association, we found just 10 presentations focused on work and learning, and in the journal we found just two articles prior to 1990. As noted by Selman and Dampier in their 1991 text, *The Foundations of Adult Education in Canada*, the focus on credential and vocational education/training was already receiving most government support "in the 'neo-conservative' 1980s" (p. 289) as compared to traditional non-vocational adult education, be it personal interest and development or social action and social change.

It is somewhat surprising that the 1987 OISE-produced collection edited by Michael Welton, *Knowledge for the People: The Struggle for Adult Learning in English-Speaking Canada, 1828–1973*, did not spark more interest in excavating other historical examples or contemporary programs that maintained the libratory imperatives described in the chapters. At least six of the nine chapters (plus the introduction) can be read as concerned with work and learning issues, including the chapter on the BC Women's Institutes, which speaks to women's unpaid domestic work (there was one article in the 1991 conference on Frontier College in a mining camp in Northern Ontario, 1925–1930, but little else that would suggest a connection to Welton's collection). More surprising still is the fact that, to date, this text still represents the best, most accessible collection of historical essays of education provision for the working people of Canada.

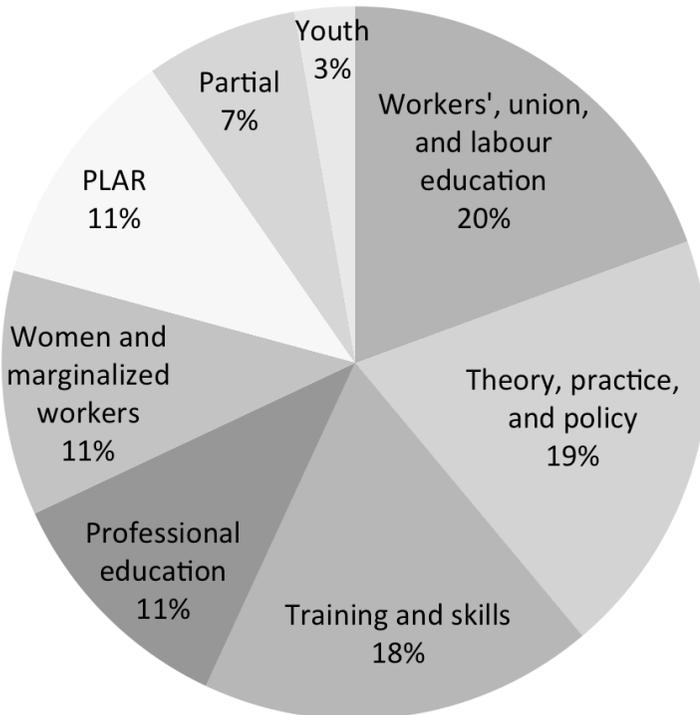
**The 1990s**

The 1990s saw an increase in journal articles and conference papers focused on issues of education for economy, but not generally narrowly focused on the state's interest in creating workers for the new economy. The number of papers in the CASAE/ACÉÉA conferences on aspects of work and learning accelerated, and the range of presentations broadened to issues of diversity, workers' education, women at work, case studies of training programs and basic skills, and theoretical pieces on the work and learning literature. There were 62 conference presentations in the 1990s and 10 journal articles that could fall within the work and learning framework. Using broad categories (and avoiding double counting by choosing one dominant theme), we found that 14 of these were focused on theory, policy, or practices of work and learning; 13 on loosely defined training/skills questions; 8 on professional education and training; 14 on workers'/union/labour education/training/learning; 8 on aspects of prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR); 8 on women's learning at work, including marginal/immigrant workers; 2 on youth; and 5 that made some passing reference to work and learning but did not have that as a sufficiently major focus to justify full inclusion.

Figure 1 provides a breakdown of these categories by percentage.

**Figure 1**

*CASAE/ACÉÉA Journal Articles and Proceedings on Work and Learning, 1990s*



These are very broad categories, and, for example, an article on workers' education can also have a theoretical perspective, or a theory or policy piece may be based on a particular focus or case study within work and learning. A round table may include a theory paper and one on a case study on women at work and a third on unions, all connected by a particular theme. One could also slice this data by approaches to learning/learning styles/learning theories/self-directed learning/etc.; by micro/macro perspectives; by case studies versa overviews; or by a number of different lenses. We have chosen a topic-based pragmatic perspective and categorization for this first cut.

In our opinion, no more than 10 of these articles and papers could be categorized as mainstream—largely uncritical but nonetheless valuable pieces that accepted or served the dominant perspective on the new economy (see Levin, 1997; Stewart, 1991; Sweet, 1996). Most raised issues and questions outside of the hegemonic training/knowledge work/competitiveness mantra, with some directly focused on critical perspectives (e.g., Fenwick & Lange, 1998) and others examining the marginal and/or excluded discourses in work and learning (e.g., Butterwick, Jackson, & Mackeracher, 1991; Spencer, 1994). (Note: For ease of readers' access to specific references cited in the sections on the 1990s and 2000s, a priority has been given to journal articles.)

Maurice Taylor's aptly named edited collection, *Workplace Education: The Changing Landscape*, was published in 1997 and represented much of the change taking place in the study of work and learning in Canada in the mid-1990s (the text also included some international experience). A number of the 23 chapters adopted a critical analytical take on the case studies and examples discussed in the collection as they ranged across issues of workplace learning; partnerships and government; sectors; and corporate training programs. The collection paved the way for more focused but less comprehensive collections that later emerged from the OISE-led research consortia (see below), and for other research work from around Canada reporting on case studies or particular provincial and/or sector training programs, or on work and learning generally; none of the later collections matched Taylor's sampling of current Canadian workplace learning issues and examples. Arguably, we are still waiting for a Canadian collection to match the balance and breadth of general work and learning issues and questions discussed in the Australians Boud and Garrick's 1999 text, *Understanding Learning at Work*. This text has provided an introduction to a sampling of issues for senior undergraduate and graduate courses in work and learning in Canada.

In 1998, the first CASAE/ACÉÉA edited collection was published. *Learning for Life: Canadian Readings in Adult Education* (Scott, Spencer, and Thomas, 1998) included four chapters specifically grouped under a sub-category "education for economy" (looking at human capital theory, learning organization theory, training, and workers' education), with at least another five touching on important aspects of work and learning issues, including chapters on competence-based learning and PLAR.

The OISE-led research consortia headed by David Livingstone deserve further mention. Two large consortia were established: one in the 1990s—New Approaches to Lifelong Learning (NALL)—the other in the next decade—The Changing Nature of Work and Lifelong Learning (WALL). Not all researchers involved in the consortia were university-based, and some came to the work from other disciplines and backgrounds. For

example, Livingstone was a sociology of education professor with an interest in school-to-work transitions and the political economy of education. However, a significant number were CASAE/ACÉÉA members, and the funding allowed for national surveys and a number of projects from across Canada, although, understandably, with a concentration on Ontario. These consortia, and others like them, gave a boost to work and learning research in Canada and to publications in a number of journals and edited texts.

### *The 2000s*

The turn of the century brought an increased intensity of neo-liberal economic policies, first from the Liberal federal government and then from the Conservatives. Any credence afforded to adult education was in the context of the contribution that could be made to boosting Canadian competitiveness in the global marketplace; funds available for research favoured work and learning, but with the expectation of a return on investment. For example, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (2007) sponsored a study entitled *Determinants of Formal and Informal Canadian Adult Learning: Insights from the Adult Education and Training Surveys*. The abstract makes it clear:

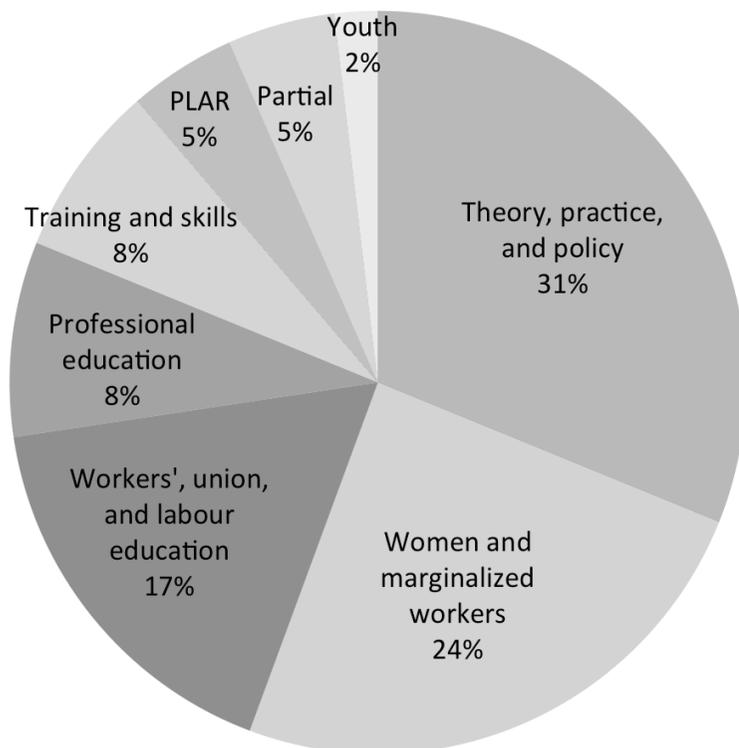
The urgency of expanding adult learning to support economic growth and higher living standards has put the focus on adults' readiness to engage in learning. In a time of evidence-based policy making there is a growing need to develop a better understanding of the factors that determine participation in adult education and training. (p. 1)

There is no doubt that many of those CASAE/ACÉÉA members involved in this and similar state-funded initiatives attempted to keep the candle lit for other adult education—personal development and social purpose—and, of course, for a more emancipatory understanding of adult learning for economy. Sustaining such approaches in this context was and continues to be a struggle.

To return to our review of journal articles and conference papers, we identified 18 journal articles and 88 conference papers from 2000 to 2010, a total of 106 publications on work and learning topics and issues. Sticking with our previous categorization, 33 of these were focused on theory, policy, or practices of work and learning (e.g., Livingstone 2007); 8 on loosely defined training/skills questions (e.g., Pinsent-Johnson, 2004); 9 on professional education and training (e.g., Jeffs, 2002); 18 on workers'/union/labour education/training/learning (e.g., Sawchuk, 2009); 5 on aspects of PLAR (e.g., Spencer & Kelly, 2005); 26 on women's learning at work, including marginal/immigrant workers (e.g., Fenwick, 2002; Gouthro, 2002); 2 on youth (e.g., Grace, 2006); and 5 that made some passing reference to work and learning but did not have that as a sufficiently major focus to justify full inclusion (e.g., Welton, 2003). Perhaps only a maximum of seven of these could be depicted as essentially mainstream—largely unquestioning but nonetheless valuable contributions to the field (e.g. Bridge, 2004)—while the remainder explored a range of knowledge issues with varying degrees of criticality. Figure 2 provides a breakdown of these categories by percentage.

**Figure 2**

*CASAE/ACÉÉA Journal Articles and Proceedings on Work and Learning, 2000s*

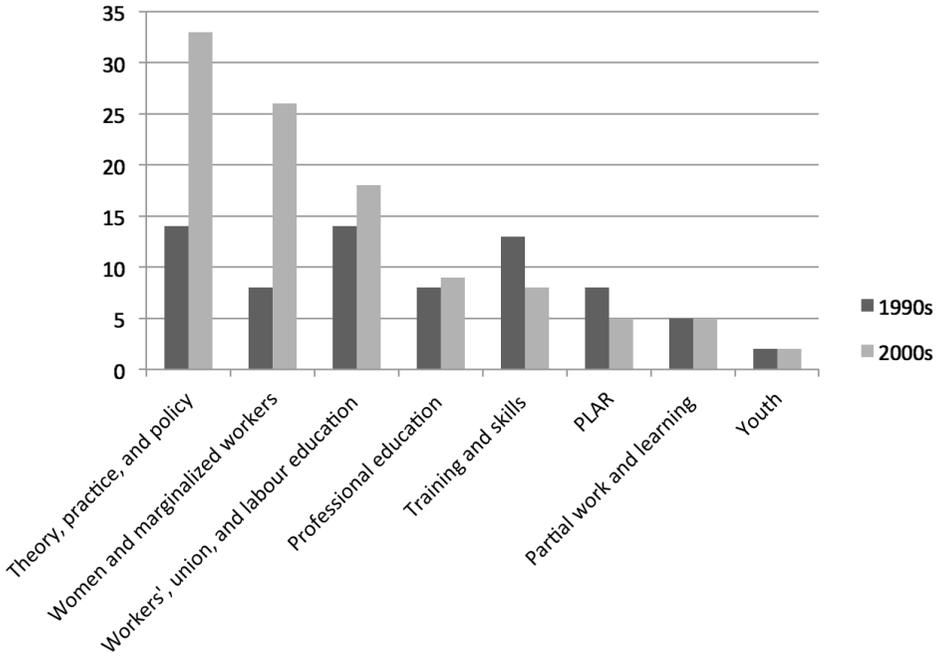


Comparing Figures 1 and 2, one can see that in the 2000s there seems to have been less emphasis (particularly proportionately to the totals) within CASAE/ACÉÉA conferences and the journal on professional education and training and skills issues (down from 11% and 18% respectively in the 1990s to 8% in both cases), and more on exploring women and marginal employment (up from 11% to 24%). Theory and policy critique grew in the 2000s (up from 19% to 31%), with a particular growing interest in workplace learning practices. The interest in worker education was sustained (although slightly down from 20% to 17%).

Figure 3 illustrates the shifts in absolute numbers of conference proceedings and journal articles in the eight categories chosen. The low numbers for some of these categories suggest caution in drawing too many conclusions, but the clear growth in exploring women's work and marginal employment and in examining theory, practice, and policy issues is clearly illustrated.

**Figure 3**

*Number of CASAE/ACÉÉA Journal Articles and Proceedings on Work and Learning, 1990s and 2000s*



Those members active in other areas of research—such as skills training, professional education, or general human resource development—and with links to extension/continuing education or colleges may, for example, have supported the Canadian Association for University Continuing Education (CAUCE) conferences and journal, or published in human resource or management journals. Also, work and learning research is often cross-disciplinary and attracts attention from a number of disciplines outside of adult education, as noted by Tara Fenwick (2006): “Workplace learning is fast becoming a central topic in fields that have little else in common. You can find its literature in journals of economics, innovation, organizational science, management/business studies, health care, and human-resource development” (p. 187). Peter Sawchuk (2011) also points this out: “The challenges are rooted in the inter-disciplinary nature of the field, the ubiquity and multi-dimensionality of human learning that demands a plurality of approaches, and a range of subtle and not-so-subtle conceptual, epistemological and even ontological differences and pre-occupations” (p. 141). Table 1 brings together all the data we have presented.

**Table 1**

CASAE /ACÉÉA Total Journal Articles and Proceedings on Work and Learning in the 1990s and 2000s

Categories	Journals (J)		Proceedings (P)		Total 1990s J+P	Total 2000s J+P	Total 1990s+2000s J+P
	1990s	2000s	1990s	2000s			
<b>1. Professional education</b>	2	1	6	8	8	9	17
<b>2. Workers', union, labour education</b>	2	4	12	14	14	18	32
<b>3. Theory, practice, and policy</b>	2	4	12	29	14	33	47
<b>4. Training and skills</b>	2	0	11	8	13	8	21
<b>5. Women and marginalized workers</b>	0	6	8	20	8	26	34
<b>6. Youth</b>	1	0	1	2	2	2	4
<b>7. Partial work and learning</b>	1	1	4	4	5	5	10
<b>8. PLAR</b>	0	2	8	3	8	5	13
<b>Total</b>	10	18	62	88	72	106	178

CASAE/ACÉÉA produced its second collection of Canadian essays in 2006. Titled *Contexts of Adult Education: Canadian Perspectives* (Fenwick, Nesbit, and Spencer, 2006), it included six chapters under the sub-heading “contexts of work and economy” (human capital and the knowledge economy, political economy of adult learning, a review of some Canadian work and learning literature, health, immigration, and labour education), with others touching on work and learning, including one on PLAR and one on professionalism in adult literacy and basic education.

Canadian adult education scholars are also evident in the 2000s as authors of a wide number of journal articles, book chapters, monographs, and edited collections, with some published in Canada or focused on Canadian experience, but others that reach beyond Canadian borders and in some cases beyond adult education; perhaps the most prolific of these authors are Tara Fenwick (now based in Stirling, Scotland) and Peter Sawchuk of

OISE. Canadians have also played a major part in sustaining the international biannual conference *Researching Work and Learning*, which started in Leeds in 1999 and had its second meeting in Calgary in 2001. The only Canadian introductory guide to the field was authored by John Bratton, Jean Helms-Mills, Tim Pyrch, and Peter Sawchuk in 2004—*Workplace Learning: A Critical Introduction*. Unfortunately, the publisher, on the verge of selling his publishing house at the time, did not pay close attention to textual editing and references. Even so, the text remains very useful for students.

### Conclusions

The data show an increase in publications and scholarship around work and learning issues; an overall significant growth in the literature, however, does not mean that CASAE/ACÉÉA members have bought into the dominant hegemonic attitudes and values. On the contrary, we would argue members have examined and scrutinized the pedagogics of work and learning. What this survey does *not* illustrate is all the ongoing work on *other* adult education/learning issues, which shows that Canadians have not abandoned adult education discourses, be they in the connection to volunteerism, community and cooperative development, immigration, identities, ethnicities, sexualities, spirituality, learning societies, learning styles/methods, or indeed a whole range of issues not connected to work and learning.

Recently, Tom Nesbit (2010), in an editorial of the CASAE/ACÉÉA journal, challenged the idea that Canadian adult education had “died” (Selman & Selman, 2009) by pointing to the ways Canadian adult educators have adapted to the new environment, and to the longevity of CASAE/ACÉÉA and its publications. Adult education practices and scholarship have definitely changed over 30 years, particularly for those in university extension departments working under a renewed emphasis on cost-recovery programs. But what this survey of Canadian scholarship on work and learning demonstrates is that CASAE/ACÉÉA members have had an appetite for analytically and critically evaluating work and learning issues in this global neo-liberal era. Long may that continue.

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