

Volume 30 Issue 1

cjsae

the canadian journal for the study of adult education

la revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes

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CJSAE Book Review

*The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education/
La revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes*
Editor-in-Chief: *Donovan Plumb*
www.cjsae-rceea.ca

30,1 January/janvier 2018
ISSN 1925-993X (online)

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L'Association canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes
www.casae-aceea.ca

SELF-CONSTRUCTION AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION: LIFELONG, LIFEWIDE AND LIFE-DEEP LEARNING

Paul Bélanger. UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, Hamburg, 2016, 286 pages.

One of the first things a reader might notice about *Self-Construction and Social Transformation: Lifelong, Lifewide and Life-Deep Learning* is that information about the author is quite limited, save for a brief personal narrative in the introduction describing how he came to write the book. A cursory web search, however, reveals Paul Bélanger to be the present chairperson of the Science Committee of the UNESCO Chair in Applied Research for Education in Prison. As well, he was director of the UNESCO Institute for Education from 1989 to 2000 and he holds two PhDs. Confirming Bélanger's status as a de facto authority on continuing education is important before engaging with this book, as he makes numerous claims throughout—both broad and specific—that are not supported by source documents or other established resources. Once the reader accepts these intermittent lapses in academic rigour, however, this book shines as a critical work aspiring toward social transformation through a panoply of sociological, philosophical, psychological, and educational lenses.

The book is structured in three parts. Part 1 works to convey learning as a process that is at once intensely intimate and socially mediated. Chapter 1 delineates a historical shift in the trajectory of education in society since the 1970s, with its emerging emphasis on diversification, differentiation, and extension into later life. In addition, here and throughout the book, Bélanger uses women's social movements as examples of the galvanizing effects of informal, and particularly popular, education. A discourse of rights permeates the book, with the right to education seen as both a fundamental right in and of itself and a necessary scaffold for all other human rights: "The act of learning...changes human beings from objects at the mercy of events to subjects who create their own history" (p. 31). Chapter 2 illuminates the dialectics inherent to education—cognitive and affective, rational and subjective, intimate and social—and underscores the false opposition between cognitivist and social constructivist theories of learning. Chapter 3 presents a useful differentiation between *individualism* and *individuality*, with an emphasis on becoming over being that treads on existentialism. In fact, in this book Bélanger subtly channels some of my own favourite social theorists and philosophers, such as Bourdieu, Apple, and, in this case, Sartre, when he writes that "whether people like it or not, they must become the agents of their own identities" (p. 59) despite widespread disparities in resources and supports.

While I found the previous chapters at times to meander and overgeneralize, by Chapter 4 the author finds his stride, with more scholarly citations and concrete examples. Here

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he describes the duality and historical transformation of the learning demand, noting the necessary and aspirational rise of the social actor: “The facts are simple, but momentous: there can be no society without active citizens, but there can be no active citizens without spaces for them to become so and social movements fighting for the change which that requires” (p. 90). Chapter 5 moves us into Part 2 with a discussion of the implications of this growing recognition of the intimacy of learning in various educational arenas. Drawing from Marxist scholars, he explains how the recent growth in active participation of workers has led to a demand not only for the exchange value of their work (i.e., wages), but for intrinsic and subjective use value as well: “The right to work involves more than just the right to be paid; it also involves the aspiration to make a personal contribution and have it recognized” (p. 104). In Chapter 6 he presents a new vision of basic-education policy that recognizes the intimacy of learning, encompasses all stakeholders, encourages active lifelong learning, helps learners express their learning demands, and engenders a democratic vision of adult literacy. Chapter 7 reveals a progressive edge to Bélanger with an amusing sharpness that is unseen elsewhere in the book. Here he plays with the notion of intimacy, lamenting the socially mandated decline of the legitimacy of both learning and sexuality after the age of retirement: “It is as if [certain institutions and authorities] were afraid that seniors who were not in decline but still full of life might somehow become too unmanageable!” (p. 149). Further, he is adamant in his claim that active citizenship for older adults is crucial not only for seniors, but as a resource for all of society.

To my mind, Chapter 8 is Bélanger’s most informative. Powerfully embracing critical theory, the author provides an array of exemplars, demonstrating popular education as a force for collective action and “true democracy,” particularly for women, and as that which “questions the so-called neutrality of the written word” (p. 183). Chapter 9 discusses the growing problem of workplace harassment and the need for structural responses to ensure workers’ psychological integrity is respected. Chapter 10 serves as Part 3 of the book and is the most prescriptive. Taking a biographical, sociological, and ecological perspective, Bélanger delineates the conditions necessary for autonomous, intimate learning, interweaving specific policies, practices, and programming that either do or should exist to guarantee everyone’s right to meaningful education throughout their lives. The onus is on us, as he insists that “in all three areas—environment, health, and the aging of the population—policymakers will never look beyond the short term and take the risks seriously unless pressure from and collective action by an informed public force them to do so” (p. 225). The conclusion, Chapter 11, provides a useful synopsis and outlines Bélanger’s fundamental pedagogical principles that power the learning dialectic.

From my own position as a researcher-advocate in the field of education, I appreciate Bélanger’s critical perspective and his aspiration toward social transformation, particularly in terms of women’s equality and access to education for the less privileged. I do feel, however, that the book would have benefitted from a clearer focus and narrower mandate, more elaborate case studies, and more concrete, actionable recommendations. Indeed, I think its emphasis on breadth over depth situates it more as a textbook for students than as a guide for policy makers, which is perhaps what Bélanger had in mind all along.

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