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10 Years of *Adult Learning*: Content Analysis of an Academic Journal

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to examine 10 years of *Adult Learning* (2006-2015). This paper highlights findings related to journal issues, authorship, article purposes, frameworks, research designs, and prevalent themes and trends.

Keywords: adult learning, AAACE, journal, content analysis

Founded in 1982, The American Association of Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE, n.d.) believes “lifelong learning contributes to human fulfillment and positive social change” (Vision Statement). Sponsored by the organization, *Adult Learning* (n.d.) publishes “empirical research and conceptual papers for researchers and practitioners that approach practice issues with a problem-solving emphasis” (para. 1). Academic publications provide insight into a discipline’s history, knowledge base, and research norms, and analyzing a journal’s publication activity provides learning about the field of study (Taylor, 2001).

The purpose of this study was to examine 10 years of *Adult Learning* from 2006 through 2015. Four research questions guided the study: How do regular and special issues compare? Who authors articles? What are the frequently used keywords, article purposes, frameworks, and research designs? What are the prevalent themes and trends? The findings provide insight into the field of adult and continuing education through the lens of one journal.

Conceptual Framework and Literature

A three-part conceptual framework and related literature guided the study: the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education’s (AAACE) commissions, including the Commission of Professors of Adult Education (CPAE), and special interest groups (SIGs), the history of *Adult Learning*, and the role of academic journals. AAACE’s eight commissions and 28 SIGs reflect the breadth of the field. By-laws govern each commission’s structure, purpose, and overall nature (Schmidt, 2013), and current commissions comprise adult basic education and literacy; affiliated organizations; community, minority, and non-formal education; distance learning and technology; international adult education; professors of adult education; program management; and workforce and professional development (AAACE, n.d.). In contrast, with enough interest, any AAACE member can form a SIG (Schmidt, 2013), and seven of the 28 SIGs appear active: adult development, graduate students of adult education, health professionals, labor and workforce education, military, popular education, and sustainability and environmental adult education (AAACE, n.d.).

The Commission of Professors of Adult Education (CPAE) strives to strengthen academic program excellence, disseminate resources to support the field and related research and practice, provide professional development, disseminate positions on social justice issues, and provide a diverse scholarship and practice forum (Martin, n.d., The Main Purposes). In 2014, CPAE revised adult education standards recommending 10 topical areas for doctoral programs: advanced adult learning and development; foundations; leadership; technology; policy; globalization and international issues and perspectives; economic, political, and social forces; diversity and equity; advance specialty courses; and research methodology.

AAACE first published *Adult Learning* in September 1989 and over the years published issues relevant to adult education practice with varying formats and production schedules (Alfred & Cherrstrom, 2014). In 2012, SAGE began publishing the journal expanding to online access and increasing readership. In 2015, the journal's circulation reached 8,148 organizations, members, and individuals with 18,995 full-text downloads (Shrayer & Migdali, 2016).

Academic journals define the broad parameters of disciplines and specific sub-disciplines (Wellington & Nixon, 2005). Lowe (2012) described journal editors as “‘gatekeepers of knowledge,’ arbiters of academic taste and fashion who ultimately decide which approaches to particular historical problems thrive within the academy and which are squeezed out” (p. 105). Cope and Kalantzis (2009) emphasized the importance of the community of practice in which knowledge-making takes places and ultimately joins the existing body of public knowledge using the citation process to discuss, review, and verify. Thus, *Adult Learning* content provides a rich opportunity for analysis of what constitutes knowledge in the field.

Research Design

This study used content analysis to compare, contrast, and categorize a body of data (Schwandt, 2007). One use of content analysis is examining trends and patterns in documents, for example, the knowledge production in academic journals in the education discipline (e.g., Oplatka, 2012; Taylor, 2001).

For data collection, inclusion criteria comprised major articles published in *Adult Learning* from 2006 through 2015. Exclusion criteria comprised non-major articles such as editorials, special issue introductions, reflections, futures, and resources reviews. Using an Excel spreadsheet, we collected data for 22 categories related to the article, authorship, purpose, research question(s), framework, research design, and data collection and analysis methods.

For data analysis, the study used Elo and Kyngäs' (2008) three-phased qualitative content analysis process—preparation, organizing, and reporting. In the preparation phase, we selected the analysis unit based on each article's 22 Excel sheet categories. In the organizing phase, we used inductive and deductive open coding and created categories. This paper contributes the final reporting phase with major findings and trends.

Findings and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine 10 years of *Adult Learning* from 2006 through 2015. This section highlights major findings related to journal issues; article keywords, authorship, purposes, frameworks, and research designs; and prevalent themes and trends.

Journal Issues

Adult Learning published 28 issues from 2006 through 2015, ranging from one to four issues per year, specifically one quadruple issue, nine double issues, and 18 single issues (see Figure 1). Furthermore, the 28 issues comprised 18 regular issues, published every year except 2008, including three devoted to graduate student authors (2006, 2009, 2012). The remaining 10 special issues focused on a theme with one or two published each year except 2006 and 2010.

Article Keywords, Authorship, Purposes, Frameworks, and Research Designs

In qualitative research, word clouds provide a useful preliminary data analysis tool (McNaught & Lam, 2010), visually depicting text with font size directly proportional to word frequency. In 2012, SAGE began publishing *Adult Learning* and prompted authors to submit

8% from other North American countries. In contrast, 55% of the journal's subscribers reside outside North America (Shrayer & Migdali, 2016). However, in the last four years, *Adult Learning* evidenced increasing global authorship. Last, 89% of authors affiliated with academic and 11% with nonacademic institutions, possibly presenting an opportunity for faculty-practitioner publishing collaborations.

Adult Learning's articles supported AAACE's (n.d.) mission to "disseminate theory, research, information, and best practices" (Mission Statement). Article purposes somewhat aligned with commissions and SIGs and CPAE's doctoral program topical areas but with varying frequency and some gaps. Specifically, three purposes aligned and represented over half of articles, teaching, learning, and curriculum (related to adults in higher education, 27%); literacy (13%); and international (12%). Teaching, learning, and curriculum dominated the 2006 graduate student-authored and 2007 special higher education issues, possibly influenced by the number of academic authors and those researching teaching as practice, but decreased during the last four years. Special issues influenced approximately half of literacy (numeracy in 2008) and international (UNESCO in 2011) purposed articles.

Aligned purposes also included training and professional development; diversity, environment and outdoor; military; adult development; corrections related; informal and nonformal; research designs; spirituality; and although not represented by primary purposes, health, leadership, and program management. Special issues represented all or almost all training and professional development (workplace learning in 2011) and environment and outdoor (green in 2013) purposed articles. Unaligned commissions, SIGs, or topical areas not found in this study included adult counseling and psychology (often combined with the represented adult development), foundations, and partnerships and affiliations. Unaligned, possibly emerging, purposes included mentoring, bullying and incivility, adult education as a movement, policy, and social media. Special issues represented all or almost all mentoring (2009) and bullying and incivility (2015) purposed articles.

Theoretical and conceptual frameworks guide research development. In this study, major frameworks included learning theories (24%), adult education theories (14%), research designs (12%), critical theories (10%), program evaluation theories (6%), and mentoring theories (6%). Notably, 14% of articles had no framework, but the use of frameworks increased during the last five years. During the 10 analyzed years, learning theories and research designs as frameworks remained relatively consistent. However, the use of adult education theories decreased during the last four years. In contrast, critical theories as frameworks increased during the last five years, aligned with a special issue on the pedagogy of teaching race (2014), and may signal a shift in the field toward using critical lenses. Special issues on literacy (numeracy in 2008) and mentoring (2009) also aligned with respective increases in program evaluation and mentoring theories as frameworks.

In research design, *Adult Learning* issues comprised 72% conceptual and 28% empirical articles, aligning with the journal's stated mission. Special issues influenced the mix with 84% conceptual articles compared to 65% in regular issues. Empirical articles generally increased over time with 88% published during the last six years, possibly reflecting more rigorous standards. The underlying studies predominately used qualitative methods (75%) followed by quantitative (18%) and mixed (8%) methods.

Prevalent Themes and Trends

This study identified five themes related to *Adult Learning's* breadth, special issue

influence, intersection with adult and higher education, AAACE and CPAE alignment, and trends. First, *Adult Learning's breadth* cut across multiple categories, supporting and reflecting the breadth of the field (Merriam & Brockett, 2007) and diversity of readers (Shrayer & Migdali, 2016) and authors. For example, publishing regular issues supported breadth across and within issues in addition to the depth of special issues focusing on one theme. Such breadth reflected in keywords, purposes, and frameworks.

Second, *special issues influenced* the journal. For example, eight of the 10 analyzed years included one or two special issues and, compared to regular issues, disproportionately represented conceptual articles. Furthermore, special issues represented all or almost all mentoring, training and professional development, environment and outdoor, and bullying and incivility purposed articles and approximately half of literacy and international purposed articles. According to Conlon et al. (2006), special issues contribute to the published body of knowledge by creating unique subfields of study and focusing the field on potentially worthwhile topics; however, this must be balanced with the potential of special issues constricting topic breadth and reducing scholarship diversity.

Third, the journal reflected *the intersection of adult learning with adult and higher education*. For example, regular issues included three devoted to graduate student authors. In authorship, highest academic degree and affiliated institution illuminated the high number of faculty who publish, likely due to tenure and promotion publishing requirements and possibly teaching as research and practice. Teaching, learning, and curriculum and adult learning and education theories dominated article purpose and frameworks.

Fourth, *Adult Learning aligned with varying frequency and some gaps* to AAACE's commissions and SIGs and CPAE's doctoral program topical areas. Gaps included unaligned commissions, SIGs, or topical areas not found in this study such as adult counseling and psychology (often combined with the represented adult development), foundations, and partnerships and affiliations. Unaligned purposes included mentoring, bullying and incivility, adult education as a movement, policy, and social media. These unaligned purposes may suggest diminishing and emerging areas of adult educator interest.

Last, *Adult Learning is positively trending* in international authors and subscribers, critical theories as frameworks, and empirical articles. Increasing international authors and subscribers indicate the journal's expanding reach and reflect globalization's impact on the field. Increasing use of frameworks to guide research and proportion of empirical articles may reflect changes in journal evaluation criteria.

Implications and Conclusion

This study offers implications for policy, theory, and practice and informs future research. Specifically, the study adds a systematic 10-year review of *Adult Learning* to the literature, documenting themes, alignments, gaps, and trends in issues, keywords, authorship, article purposes, frameworks, and research designs. The study also informs AAACE and editorial leadership and may influence organization, publication, and editorial policy. Last, the study provides the first *Adult Learning* summary and may inform adult educators about research, practice, and publishing opportunities.

Reflecting the field of adult education and continuing education, *Adult Learning* strives to meet the practitioner-oriented needs of adult educators across diverse audiences, purposes, and contexts. The continued value of *Adult Learning* lies in its commitment to represent the breadth of the field and promote deep inquiry into the relevant challenges and opportunities facing

today's adult educators.

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