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Recommended Citation

Chang, Bo (2015). "Managing the Documents of Adult Education– Historical Perspective," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2015/papers/10>

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Managing the Documents of Adult Education– Historical Perspective

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Keywords: historical data, data collection, data analysis

Abstract: In this paper, the author discussed how to collect and analyze data in historical perspective. In historical inquiry, researchers identify the research questions, specify the domain which relates to the research questions, and familiarize themselves with how the documents are structured and managed in the host library. In collecting data, researchers do not need to limit themselves to how the documents are labeled by the archivists. They can break the boundaries of the labeled documents and find out how seemingly unrelated documents are actually interrelated.

Positivists and constructionists view history differently, which results in different approaches in how historical data can be analyzed. Positivists believe in transparent and universal truth generalized and/or inferred from the historical data. Constructionists regard that generalization and inference are not sufficient for researchers to understand why certain historical events occurred. Situating themselves in the historical context and/or establishing empathy enables researchers to feel the historical moments and explain and interpret data in the historical context. To better support historical study, the author provides suggestions to the data host libraries, the agents which provide the historical data, and conferences and journals which officially document the historical data.

Introduction

History can find solutions from the past to inform present and future trends. Hoxie (1906) regarded that “historical data are scientifically important only when they explain some matter of fact of vital interest to us” (p.570), which is consistent with Dewey’s idea that historical knowledge is useful only when it can inform current problems (Fallace, 2010). Historical inquiry allows us to reevaluate the historical data which relate to our current generalizations of the past and understand the dynamics of the changes in the field of education, and to know the relationship between education and its historical context and culture (Good, 1966; Hill & Kerbert, 1967).

However, in the field of adult education, there is a lack of research into the history of adult education. The purpose of this paper is to discuss how to collect and analyze data in historical perspective. Mason, McKenney, & Copeland (1997) stated that the process of doing historical study includes: Begin with focusing questions, specify the domain, gather evidence, critique the evidence, determine patterns, tell the story, and write the transcript. In this paper, I will discuss how to collect and manage historical data. Specifically, I will focus on the process of targeting questions, specifying the domain areas from which I will gather the data, and collecting and analyzing data— mainly using my data collection experience at the Syracuse University Library in 2014 as a case.

Collecting Data

Collecting historical data is a process of narrowing down a large scope of information, labeling it as first priority and second priority data, and categorizing the data based on your own research purposes. Primary sources and secondary sources are the major sources for a historical study. A primary source “is the *subjective* interpretation of a witness to an event or activity, not

just an original, unpublished manuscript” (Robyns, 2001, p.377). Primary sources include these such as:

(1) written, in the form of official documents, unpublished documents, diaries, memoirs, letters, memos, clippings, and the like; (2) material, in the form of objects, artifacts, and visit of actual sites; (3) traditional, in the form of stories of the past repeated by secondary sources; and (4) eye witness testimony. (Mason, McKenney, & Copeland, 1997, p. 313)

Secondary source, or public sources, such as annual reports, books, and documents, can provide the background information for a historical study (Mason, McKenney, & Copeland, 1997). Golder (2000) stated that:

Secondary sources are testimony from witnesses who were not present at the event of interest. Although the testimony of secondary sources is not as authentic, it can provide important corroboration or add missing details that are consistent with the testimony of primary sources. (p.160)

At the Syracuse University library, I simultaneously collected primary and secondary sources. Within two weeks, I had collected a large amount of data which I needed by: making copies of the minutes of the meetings, related correspondences, and memoirs; taking photos of the titles of the conference proposals and journal articles; collecting some pictures of the events and major leaders in the field; and checking related online resources.

Secondary resources can help researchers connect the dots of the primary resources by putting them in a historical context. Researchers search the secondary resources immediately through online databases or through an internet search while they are collecting their primary resources. For example, while I was collecting information about the 1980 adult education handbook, I immediately searched the related books which were mentioned in the primary sources to find out whether they related to the historical project I was researching.

Living witnesses play an important role in filling in the missing points and interpreting the variances in the documents. When I collected data, I could not tie all of the pieces of the vast amount of historical information together and understand them in the historical context. It is necessary to interview some adult educators who were in leadership positions in the main adult education organizations such as AEA (Adult Education Association) and AAACE (American Association for Adult and Continuing Education) and who were able to witness the historical moments described in the documents.

The librarians grouped the documents based on certain common criteria in the university library. However, researchers each have their own research agenda. When they collect data, they need to break up the categories set by the archivists and find their own niche as they go through repositories of various historical data. When I searched beyond the category of adult education, I did not intend to collect information about community education, literacy education, and adult continuing education. However, these documents happened to be grouped in the same boxes, so I quickly screened them and found out the related policies. These policies gave me a more in-depth understanding of adult education in a larger historical context. Grigg (1991) stated that compared with the traditional ways of collecting materials through the isolated merits, the new tendency is to select materials in a larger context, “taking a broad view of the historical record

and allowing for the interests and capacities of other repositories” (p.234), which will help researchers find sources in and through repositories.

Analyzing Data

The dominant view of historical inquiry is that historical narrative should be transparent to maintain its objective truth. Like the positivist approach of studying science and finding out the general norms through measuring the central tendencies, the dominant tradition in studying history relies on collecting facts and conceptualizing the repetitive common occurrences (Firat, 1987) or finding out the casual chains in timelines that have influenced history (Mason, McKenney, & Copeland, 1997). Inferences can be used to generalize the meaning of the events out of data which are relevant to the present (Golder, 2000).

Historical data can be organized chronologically, so that the causes and effects and the contradictory evidence can be recognized in an appropriate context (Golder, 2000). Researchers can use data processing software such as D2K to retrieve the data they need and avoid a large amount of redundant data; they can use the key-words-in-context approach to study highly relevant results; they can also use visualization to create various forms of historical data (AHRC ICT Methods Network, n. d.). Timelines, maps, graphic organizers, etc. are all different visual formats which can be used to analyze, manage and represent data (“What to teach,” n. d.).

Content analysis can help researchers make inferences by identifying the characteristics in the historical text (Stone, Dunphy, Smith, & Ogilvie, 1966). Researchers transform the content into numerical terms by counting the frequency of the terms occurring in the text. Inferences are developed through this frequency count, with which themes are developed. Statistical techniques can be applied to help researchers count the frequency of the terms in a given text (Moodie, 1971). Content analysis is used by me to examine the titles of the conference proposals and journal articles since the 1950s. Counting the frequencies of the terms which occurred in the conferences and journals can help me identify what really mattered during a certain period of time.

Content analysis can provide the general patterns of the terms which occurred, but it cannot sufficiently help me understand why certain groups of terms frequently occurred in the main publications. To understand the historical variations, it is necessary for researchers to situate themselves in the historical context. Mason, McKenney and Copeland (1997) called it establishing empathy. They stated that “achieving empathy with the protagonists in the study requires that the researchers imagine themselves in the real actors' environment and put themselves in their minds” (p.316) in order to see the events through the eyes of those who experienced them. I read some documents which, on the surface, are not related to the history of adult education, but helped me to understand the nature of adult education from a living life perspective. For example, I read speeches such as *A case for public school adult education* and *Text of speech given by Robert Blakely at the Arden House Institute, March 1959*. In these speeches, historical figures/educators/officials provided beautiful and insightful thoughts about adult education from a living life perspective. It is so different from the larger context of adult education nowadays which is very utilitarian and professional-driven. Reading these side documents enriched my understanding of adult education which was integrated into our daily lives in the past.

Conclusion

History informs the present and future by showing us the patterns which have repeatedly occurred over time. It helps us to see the sources and causes of the problems and also the evolution of the field.

In historical inquiry, researchers identify the research questions, specify the domain which relates to the research questions, and familiarize themselves with how the documents are structured and managed in the host library. Researchers need to identify their priorities in the domain to ensure that they can collect as many related documents as possible within a limited time period.

In collecting data, researchers collected as many primary sources as possible, and at the same time collect those secondary sources which are highly related to the topic or mentioned in the primary sources. In collecting data, researchers do not need to limit themselves to how documents are labeled by the archivists. They can break the boundaries of the labeled documents and find out how the seemingly unrelated documents are actually interrelated.

Positivists and constructionists view history differently, which results in different approaches in how historical data can be analyzed. Positivists believe in transparent and universal truth generalized and/or inferred from the historical data. Researchers can list data in chronological order, through which they infer the cause-and-effect relationships and the evolution of the field. Researchers can also use content analysis to study the frequency of the terms that occur in the historical data, from which they can generalize the common themes and repeated patterns. Constructionists regard that generalization and inference are not sufficient for researchers to understand why certain historical events happen. Situating themselves in the historical context and/or establishing empathy enables researchers to feel the historical moments and explain and interpret data in the historical context.

Implications for Practice

Studying a long period of history in the field of adult education requires a researcher to examine an enormous amount of historical materials. How to manage historical data to better support researchers' projects is very important. In order to better support historical study, I have provided the following suggestions.

Agents Which Provided the Historical Data

AEA and other adult education organizations have provided very detailed historical information about their conference planning, business meetings, budgets, etc., and documented the process of how these adult education organizations are managed and structured. For example, AEA documented the significant issues which occur yearly, and discussed how to lobby the federal government to get financial support. This part seems missing in the current AAACE. In the future, I recommend that AAACE not only report the management and logistics issues, but also report the most significant issues/questions/topics which happened in a given year, document the main opinions/trends of the yearly conferences, the most significant work during the year, and the struggles, and the reasons which caused these struggles. The business meeting of the Commission of Professors of Adult Education (CPAE) at the AAACE has such a discussion every year, but without the documentation posted online, however. A one or two-page documentation about the yearly main opinions/trends would record the features of adult education in that year, help to gain lessons from the past, and provide very valuable information about the development of the field historically. The chronicle records will help researchers in the

future study the trends of adult education. They will provide clues for future researchers about how the field has changed its landscape historically.

In terms of the organization of the documents, I would recommend that AAACE add the link of Adult Education Quarterly (AEQ) and also the link of the Syracuse University Library to its website. In addition, I would recommend that the Syracuse University Library website add the link of AAACE to its website. AAACE could also add important research articles about the conference to its webpage under history/scholarship and provide visual or even audio/video documents to the AAACE website.

Compared with word texts which can carry on complex and abstract meanings, images directly reflect the meanings of the time and are value- and bias-free. They can vividly show the contextual background of the people/events of the time (Perlmutter, 1994). In the future, AAACE could photograph the important events and post them on the AAACE website and also provide them to the Syracuse University Library.

Conferences and Journals

A key-word study of the articles accepted by the adult education conferences and journals could help researchers find out the trends of the topics in the field. However, the raw materials from the conferences such as the minutes of the meetings were mixed with the conference papers, which made it very time-consuming to pull out all the topics in the conferences in order to perform the content analysis. It would be very helpful if a conference could use graphics to list the table of contents of all the topics selected by this conference on the cover page. For the journals, I would suggest that at the end of the year, the final issue include an index of all the titles of the papers published in that journal. In this way, researchers would not need to check all of the issues of every year in order to count the frequencies of the terms used in the titles.

For the journal articles, I recommend that the authors use explicit key words in their titles rather than only using metaphors. Some authors used implicit words or metaphors in their titles which are highly context-based, thus making it difficult for researchers in the future to do the content analysis.

Host of the Historical Data

The Syracuse University Library is the hub for raw materials in the field of adult education. Since new materials are continuously being sent to the Syracuse University library, it is really time-consuming for the librarians to trace them in a way which can satisfy every researcher's needs, since every researcher has his/her specific purpose, and may mentally picture the order of the materials differently. These detailed documents are like precious pearls located at the bottom of a big sea. Researchers need to go over every folder one by one to find the ones they need. The librarians can help researchers to save their time, if they can eliminate duplicated files and combine the raw materials with their final product. For example, the annual report for 1982 is repeated in two folders: 1982 annual report, and 1982-1983 report. The 1982 report is part of the 1982-1983 book. I had to go back to re-check the contents of both files in order to make sure that I did not make duplicated copies. Another issue is about re-organizing the raw materials and the final product. I noticed that some raw materials were put in several folders in one box. Later, I found the compiled report based on these raw materials in another box. The librarians could put the raw materials and the final report together, and label them as "raw materials" and "final product". This will save researchers from having to spend time figuring out their relationship.

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Acknowledgment

I am very thankful for the Syracuse University Library Special Collections Research Center for financially supporting me through the Alexander N. Charters Adult Education Research Grant! I especially would like to thank the following people from the Special Collections Research Center who provided me with their great support and their hospitality during my trips to Syracuse University:

Sean M Quimby, Previous Senior Director of Special Collections
Barbara Brooker, Assistant to the Interim Senior Director of Special Collections
Nicole C. Dittrich, Reading Room Supervisor
Michele R Combs, Librarian/Lead Archivist
Nicolette A. Dobrowolski, Head of Public Services, Reference Librarian
Other librarians at the Syracuse University Library who helped me during my visit
Dr. Alexander N. Charters and Dr. Tom Phelan who supported my project

I also thank all the adult educators who have been interviewed