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## Adult Education as Building Community: The Parameters and Realities of Enterprise Identity in North America (1945-70)

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# **Adult Education as Building Community: The Parameters and Realities of Enterprise Identity in North America (1945-70)**

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## **Introduction**

In my historical work investigating the emergence of North American adult education (1945-70) I argue that, despite widespread social and cultural change forces permeating life, learning and work after World War II, scientific, technological and economic change forces were ascendant, predominantly shaping mainstream adult education as a techno-scientized enterprise. In this paper I consider how the demand for different forms of adult education, coupled with the impact of the discourse of democracy that developed in reaction to the fear and mystique of totalitarianism, shaped the answer to the question "What is adult education (1945-70)?" I look at adult education's efforts to build community during this time of enterprise expansion. I take up three questions to explore the notion of adult education as a community in itself and as a community within other sociocultural communities: What sort of community did adult education comprise? If we imagine the broader discipline of education as a community, then what space (a recognized and useful presence) and place (a respected and valued position) did adult education have in it from the perspectives of those involved in public and higher education? If we envision postwar North American society as a community, then what space and place did adult education have in the larger scheme of things? As part of this investigation, I use a critical postmodern perspective to consider how lifelong learning had become an expression of adult education's hope for the future and how instrumental, social and cultural forms of adult education vied for space and place in an increasingly techno-scientized mainstream practice. I conclude my paper by reflecting on issues and problems in postwar community development pertinent to the construction of community in adult education.

## **The Discourse of Democracy and the Drive to Techno-scientize Adult Education**

In the era of modern practice the answer to the question "What is adult education?" has been inextricably linked to adult education's search for space and place in North America's dominant culture and its institutions. After World War II, the response was shaped by a multiplicity of social and cultural change forces reconfiguring everyday life in postindustrial society. This society spawned a burgeoning knowledge and service economy and ushered in an era of pervasive government involvement that deeply affected education as a sociocultural enterprise. In the 1960s Canadian and US federal governments, treading water in a sea of social unrest, poured moneys into education as part of a makeshift solution to address poverty, undereducation and unemployment. Mainstream adult education became a vehicle serving dominant cultural interests in this period in at least two key ways: (a) It acted as a cultural messenger preaching the discourse of democracy to ordinary citizens, and (b) it delivered instrumental forms of education

that prepared the citizen workers needed to advance North American techno-scientific and economic interests. In effect, adult education provided programs whose design and longevity were generally determined by government and other institutions with vested interests in using the enterprise to support the local and growing global primacy of North America's dominant culture and its values. Understanding the North American system of enterprise and government was grouped with technical competence, community development and adjustment, and personal growth and development when listing key concerns of adult education in the emerging postindustrial society (Butz, 1958).

### **The Parameters of Building Community within Adult Education**

In the early 1960s Alan M. Thomas (1961) claimed that adult educators had taken the enterprise "from an idealistic, determined, intermittent, fringe enterprise to a central, practical, everyday - *if little understood* [italics added] - concern of many individuals and organizations" (p. 405). What were the parameters of this "little understood" entity as it emerged in postindustrial society? Can adult education (1945-70) be constructed and defined as a community in itself? Were there common goals and objectives, a common ideology, a common knowledge base, and a distinct membership? To some degree, a community was emerging exhibiting these common elements. The efforts of adult educators to build community were exemplified by the postwar growth and development of graduate adult education, the increasing professionalization of the field, the promotion of lifelong learning, and the development of a growing body of knowledge and research specific to adult education (Liveright, 1968). The preoccupation with change also provided a rallying point for adult educators in the postwar decades. Period literature is replete with references to rapid-change culture and social change forces complicating the lives of citizen workers and learners, and exacerbating the plight of Blacks, the poor and other forgotten people. The social and the economic became interwoven concerns for adult educators called upon to muster resources to assist adult learners faced with technological change, worker obsolescence, complex domestic problems, and civic and political unrest (Liveright, 1968). The need for a concerted community effort, for a focus on the social, was clear. However, the ability of adult education to deliver convincingly on a social level-indeed on any level-remained questionable. Descriptions by key adult educators including A. A. Liveright (1968) suggested that the task to build a learning community addressing social and other concerns was still an onerous one. In his 1965-66 field study he reported that adult education was working to meet diverse needs, but it did so "on an unplanned, disorganized, and uneven basis" (p. 1). He listed these roadblocks to building community: (a) the lack of financial support, (b) the lack of trained personnel, (c) the lack of space and place in institutions, (d) the lack of leadership and direction in a rapidly expanding field, and (e) the lack of societal commitment to adult education. Paul H. Sheats, Clarence D. Jayne, and Ralph B. Spence (1953) listed other roadblocks: (a) the lack of agreed-upon ethical principles to guide the emergence of the enterprise, (b) the lack of adequately trained adult educators and the absence of professional standards of behavior, and (c) the general failure to monitor and evaluate the extent to which goals and objectives had been accomplished in the enterprise.

These roadblocks hooked into the larger issue of enterprise fragmentation that worked against building community in adult education. Institutionalization was a key determinant in this regard. While field history showed the persistence of the concept of "adult education" (Verner, 1964a), adult education usually remained a secondary and not clearly defined activity in many institutions (Liveright, 1968). In his history of US adult education, Malcolm S. Knowles (1962/1977), suggesting that the enterprise had never been a united movement or common endeavor, called adult education "a patternless mosaic of unrelated activities" (p. viii). In many respects this "patternless mosaic" was a product of the institutionalization of adult education. Institutionalization meant that adult educators had different allegiances and responsibilities. This contributed to the enterprise's diffuse nature, making it difficult to coordinate the field. It complicated building community in the Deweyian (1916/1944) sense of sharing things in common. The problems of a diffuse nature were compounded by the problems of the episodic nature of the enterprise's growth and development. Roger W. Axford (1969) described adult education as a fragmented and sporadic venture that responded to specific needs as they arose. Liveright (1968) related that the diffuse and episodic nature of adult education had made it difficult to create a national umbrella organization that would represent the entire field and create a strong public image for the enterprise. This nature also stood in the way of generating a widely accepted enterprise definition. It was often difficult to name something "adult education." Naming - the clear delineation of particular institutions and programs as adult educational - was an important part of building community and countering the enterprise's peripheral educational status (Liveright, 1968). It was necessary to clarify adult education's identity and demonstrate its pervasiveness as a community in North American culture.

The pronounced drive to professionalize adult education after World War II can also be understood as an attempt to build community, albeit within particular purposes and parameters that would redesign the field. Since professional adult educators wanted the enterprise to have space and place in the emerging postindustrial society, they promoted techno-scientization of the field and developed programs to produce the workers needed to advance the national and global interests of the dominant culture. Professional adult educators built community as the cult of the expert. They incorporated knowledge, practices and a disposition designed to locate adult education not merely as a subset of the dominant culture but as one of its most valuable commodities. However, building this professional community was a very difficult task. The field lacked the rudiments of a professionalized practice (Thomas, 1958). Despite this problem, professionalism gained ground, with some adult educators seeing professionalization as a counter force to institutionalization. William S. Griffith (1970) felt that professionalization of the enterprise could help break down the barriers to growth and development that the institutions themselves presented. He believed that a professionally prepared adult educator would be more inclined to think in terms of the totality of the field. Speaking to the issue of field fragmentation in the United States, he contended that professionalism could induce a spirit of cooperation and lead to the development of a national agenda for adult education.

### **Adult Education's Space and Place in the Field of Education and in North American Society**

Adult education's rejection of the formal structure of public education as too narrowly focused on the education of children and youth is a repeated theme in postwar field literature. Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) conclude "the general momentum [in the era of modern practice] seems to have been toward separatism, toward dissociation from the broader field of education" (p. 230). Adult education's incongruity with the culture of academe can also be mentioned as problematic to adult education's space and place in the field of education. The enterprise's attempt to build community within the university was influenced by the changing nature of the university as well as by the federal incursion into higher education. The increasing emphasis on organized, techno-scientific research deeply changed academe, accelerating professionalization of academics and diminishing the value of their educational role (Kerr, 1995; Touraine, 1974). Adult education sought space and place in this complex, fluid community where professionalism meant valuing research over education. This placed adult education at a disadvantage because the enterprise had traditionally been more about practice than research, and it could not boast a significant research base. To have space and place, adult education appeared reduced to intensifying its operations in the realm of the techno-scientific. Here training in techniques became training in the ideology, values and interests of the dominant culture (Miliband, 1974). However, despite its efforts to conform to the values of the university, adult education remained the "stepchild of the [North] American university" (Riesman, 1981, p. 113).

Adult education also had a lesser space and place in North American society. In their 1953 report on the status of US adult education, Sheats, Jayne and Spence indicated that adult education had not established a valued cultural presence despite a discernable cultural impact. Some years later, the public relations report for the 1969 Galaxy Conference of US Adult Education Organizations indicated that there had been little change in the enterprise's cultural status. Adult education was not viewed as a pervasive and proactive cultural force. It had an image as a middle-class venture and the enterprise was viewed as a commodity least useful to those who could benefit most from using it. Adult education was still not available (relevant and affordable) to every citizen (Liveright, 1968). Liveright (1968) called for "new institutional forms providing flexibility, visibility, relevance, and accessibility ... [to] be developed to overcome past aversions, reluctance, and opposition to continuing education" (p. 16). His call supported David B. Rauch's (1969) contention that the enterprise remained the least developed part of the North American educational system.

### Lifelong Learning and Field Directions

From a critical postmodern perspective, hope is viewed as a precondition for action within a pedagogy of adult learning community. As the modern practice of adult education emerged after World War II, the enterprise's hope for the future found expression in the discourse of lifelong learning. In its postwar form, Stubblefield and Keane (1989) contend that lifelong learning "reflected an attempt to make adult education an object of public policy" (p. 35). In adult education the discourse of lifelong learning became intermeshed with the discourse of democracy. Sheats, Jayne, and Spence (1953) declared, "Lifelong learning becomes essential for the survival of the American system of government. The vitality of that system depends upon the quantity and quality of participation in what we call community life" (p. 486). From this

perspective, it appeared that lifelong learning was meant to shape community life in dominant cultural terms. Its discourse putting productivity and politics before people became a real concern to those adult educators working to develop an inclusionary enterprise addressing instrumental, social and cultural concerns. Alexander N. Charters (1970) was among those sounding a discordant note in the hymn to lifelong learning. Acknowledging that "this concept has often been stated by adult educators as a belief and with the vehemence of a fact" (p. 488), he spoke to the reality of lifelong learning beyond such internal devotion. If there was a wider interest in lifelong learning, it was affected by a slow-changing cultural disposition valuing adult education as a cultural commodity.

### **Forms of Adult Education in the Post-World War II Enterprise**

**Instrumental, social and cultural forms of adult education are all valued in a critical postmodern pedagogy of adult learning community. Giving space and place to them is considered critical to building an inclusionary practice. While there is evidence of all three educational forms in postwar mainstream practice, their co-presence failed to support inclusion education when they were reduced to advancing dominant cultural interests and values. During the emergence of North American adult education (1945-70), instrumental forms figured prominently in the design of adult education. The instrumentalization of modern practice was an important part of adult education's attempt to gain space and place. This dynamic deterred the building of an encompassing adult education community. Building community was reduced to a subscription to the tenets of techno-scientization. The enterprise joined the service of the credential society and often resorted to continuing education of the "'gimmick' variety" (Thompson, 1971, p. 18). Some mainstream forms of social and cultural adult education were also caught up in the advancement of dominant cultural interests and the discourse of democracy supporting those interests. This is evident, for example, in the publication of adult education principles by the Committee on Social Philosophy of the AEA in 1952. This committee took the position that adult education should mirror the ideology and aims of US cultural democracy and guide action promoting social change deemed important to the advancement of American society (Brookfield, 1987). This pronouncement belied the fact that the discourse of democracy forgot whole groups of US citizens. Many forgotten people outside the domain of White middle-class America were not included in the techno-scientific learning circle that supported the status quo. In effect, the discourse of democracy advanced an exclusionary practice where citizen learners were encouraged to work within the system to enhance their technical competencies and its technological advancement.**

### **Lessons in Building Community from Post-World War II Community Development**

**Adult education's turn to community development as a way to vitalize and focus its own efforts in postwar North America highlights issues and concerns in the construction of**

adult education as community. In his consideration of community organization for adult education, Glen Burch (1948) saw enterprise community as a loose configuration. He pointed out certain advantages to the diverse and diffuse nature of adult education: (a) It contributed to the vast growth of the movement, and (b) it built a field marked by flexibility, variety and experimentation in terms of subject areas and adult-learner interest groups. While these advantages raise questions about the degree to which adult educators should seek commonality in the enterprise, Burch also listed disadvantages that indicated a requirement for at least some sort of unifying structure and common ground. His list included: (a) The diverse and diffuse nature of adult education mitigated against cooperative planning and action; (b) It kept many adult learning activities marginal to the main work of community organizations; (c) It meant that the enterprise served only part of a community's adults, making participation in adult education an issue; and (d) It made it difficult to balance adult education resources against community needs. Burch's disadvantages point to problems that the enterprise has historically encountered in building community. They help us to understand why adult education and its community have been indeterminate cultural constructions.

Such analysis of adult education's venture into community development speaks to the importance of focusing on the "big picture." Harry O. Overstreet and Bonaro W. Overstreet (1941) believed in surveying the overall community situation before moving to planning and action. They spoke to the value of investigating the history, culture, needs, resources and constituting forces of a community. They saw each community as whole and different from other communities. This big-picture approach is useful to adult educators working to set parameters, explore possibilities and determine limits as they construct community. It requires analysis of the degree to which adult education's identity is caught up in the identities of other communities. Adult educators need to investigate how different communities affect adult education's supports and resources as well as its priorities, participation and performativity. These lessons in community development point to the intricacies of building community. In the 1945-70 period, building community in adult education proved to be a demonstration of the difficulties of finding common ground. It has been intimately connected to the quest for a recognized, fostered and valued identity in the field of education and the wider culture.

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