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## Adult Education and the Body Politic: Radical Intervention or Palliative Care?

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# **Adult Education and the Body Politic: Radical Intervention or Palliative Care?**

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## **Introduction**

In a world characterized by continuous, unsettling, and accelerating *change*, educational institutions are central to the processes by which states maintain hegemony, legitimate themselves, and foster capital accumulation (Torres 1994). Educational institutions enable these processes by preparing the human capital which sustains the economy while claiming ‘equal opportunity for all’. Nowhere is this more visible than in adult education (Pannu 1988).

This paper will argue that the boundaries which gave adult education its distinctiveness and sense of social purpose are eroding. Voices once raised in debate and critical analysis have been subdued, resulting in a crisis of legitimation (Habermas 1975). Through North America, university adult education programs, departments, and institutions have been amalgamated or eliminated entirely. I contend that adult education is contributing to its own demise by silent acquiescence to funding reductions and state interventions.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine institutions in late capitalism, and their role in a neo-liberal system of unopposed market forces. Rather, I provide a broad overview of economic and social forces which contribute to the crisis of adult education today. By examining the condition of adult education we might determine if radical intervention can eliminate the ailment infecting it, or if we should begin preparing for its demise with palliative care. In this, I draw on Habermas’s analogy of ‘crisis’ in the ‘body politic’ and the ‘body individual’.

## **Legitimation Crisis**

In taking apart advanced capitalism Habermas borrows the theory of cybernetic systems from systems theory and the medical concept of crisis. A medical crisis occurs when an organic system reaches some impasse where the various systems that make up an organism no longer integrate properly. The malfunction results either in the death of the organism or the re-establishment of homeostatic equilibrium. Analogously, advanced capitalist society is a ‘system of systems’. The political system interlocks with two other systems essential to the health of advanced capitalist societies: the economic system and the socio-cultural system. The economic system comprises the set of activities and procedures by which advanced capitalist societies appropriate the products of external nature through the labour or work of individuals. In contrast,

the socio-cultural system might be thought of as appropriating internal rather than external nature. It allows us to legitimize the political and economic systems. The socio-cultural system is that part of our society responsible for socializing and educating citizens; that is of performing those actions which allow citizens to cultivate their inner nature through education and cultivation of their minds. There is a direct connection here back to the Hegelian-Marxist tradition, with its particular concern with human consciousness. I will focus on the socio-cultural system over the last two decades as I view the health of adult education under advanced capitalism.

In the mid-1980's neo-liberalism began to flower, and there was a gradual withdrawal of the state from the public sphere. With this withdrawal a market ideology emerged and privatization began. This was most evident in the Reaganomics in the United States, and Thatcherism in the United Kingdom in which mergers, downsizing and privatization caused massive displacement of workers. This prompted disequilibrium among the three systems. The economic system became dominant. While the recession of the early 1980's affected mainly low-or intermediate-skilled blue-collar workers, it was the intelligentsia who were affected in the late 'eighties and 'nineties—educated, experienced professionals. Concurrently, an influx of women entered the workplace to supplement, (or in some cases provide) the family income—largely in the burgeoning low-wage service sector which grew out of privatization and downsizing.

Meanwhile, in an attempt to regain control, legitimate the role of the state, and ameliorate the increasing numbers of unemployed, governments began to intervene directly in the retraining of workers. Government vouchers, which previously bought seats in community colleges for training programs, and thereby employed adult educators, were redirected to private businesses providing job-training help to the unemployed. Many of these businesses were started by inexperienced individuals with little training, to take advantage of this government initiative. In Canada, The 1985 Canadian Jobs Strategy gave priority to four defined groups: women; visible minorities; the disabled; and aboriginals. The failure of these training schemes cannot be elaborated here and will comprise another, much longer, article.

At about the same time, introduction of technology to the workplace caused further displacement of workers through de-skilling and redundancy. The restructured workplace and a developing 'knowledge-based' economy lent impetus to globalization. The company-loyalty contract protecting employers and employees was broken through downsizing, outsourcing, and re-engineering, resulting in a dramatic increase in personal and small business bankruptcies. One sector will serve as an example. By investing in technology banks were able to displace local workers by moving data-processing to less developed countries, incidentally eliminating the need for adult educators and trainers in the Canadian financial industry. Meanwhile, cost-recovery programs began to appear on university campuses. Programs for worker retraining or upgrading, once a staple of adult education, now became full-cost-recovery programs marketed through continuing education or extension service departments on university campuses. New types of certificates and diplomas began to appear which carried 'diploma credits' rather than academic credit. Commodification was underway in the academy as workers, conscious of increased credentialism in the marketplace, scrambled to obtain new workplace credentials.

During this time of upheaval, adult education should have been in the forefront of community action exposing exploitative practices; instead there was little response. Welton (1987) scolds adult educators for a "lack a coherent understanding of the social purpose of adult education ... because they are fragmented along institutional lines ... as professionals marketing programs and not as activists mobilizing people through dialogue" (1987 p. 29-30). Social activists contend that adult educators abdicate responsibility if they are not actively involved in changing the social and economic order. But at this time debates focused more on the legitimation of adult education within the academy, than on its role of leading community action groups "promoting goals such as peace, equity, justice, and quality of life for all" (Cunningham 1989, p. 4). Brookfield (1989) places the blame squarely on the technicist, professional discourse that constitutes modern adult education practice. He argues that "the search for academic respectability and the quest for professional identity have effectively depoliticized the field" (1989, p. 160). Cunningham (1989), despairs of the instrumental state of adult education, claiming it "has been reduced to describing the technology of adult education, in which *means* have been elaborated into *ends*" (p. 40). Collins (1991) goes further, labeling the technicist conception of adult education "the cult of efficiency ... in North American adult education" (p. 2). Activists insist that adult educators cannot simply deliver a technically competent service which expresses no social view. The stasis reflects the moribund condition of adult education and raises serious questions.

Does adult education sustain the existing social and political order by reproducing labour, class, gender, race, and cultural divisions? Torres (1994) argues that it does; that in its social context, adult education acts as an organization of the state which sustains an hegemonic ideology through interactions between policy-makers, adult educators, and participants in programs. Griffin (1996) argues that politics is inevitably tied to power and its distribution in society and both the study and practice of adult education are shaped by the social, ideological, economic, and political contexts within which it has evolved. Increasingly the state interferes with or manipulates these contexts. And since 'those who pay the piper call the tune,' the state influences the determination of what provisions are made for adult education. Through the selective allocation of funds the state can influence the learning opportunities offered, so that priority is given to ideologically or socially favoured populations and purposes. This effect can be seen in the demise of community action groups and the proliferation of special interest groups focused on individual or ideological concerns. State funding, once destined for community groups, is redirected to ideological interests when the state realizes the power of these groups to attract media attention—'the voices most shrill get cash in the till'. This fragmenting of adult education's purpose by special interests, focuses attention on the individual and away from broader issues of social justice. To aggravate the injury, the state appropriates the lexicon of adult education to legitimate its political decisions. Adult education is experiencing a widespread crisis of relevance; its vocabulary is being appropriated while its prominence and authority dissipates. What can be done? Where do we begin looking for answers?

### Tracing the Etiology

In this crisis of adult education, tensions emerge which are not immediately traceable to their point of origin. Let me again use Habermas's analogy of the body politic and the body individual. When someone goes to the doctor with a complaint about their blood circulation, the cause of the complaint may be found in a different system altogether. It may, for example, refer from the respiratory system. In other words, the systems that make up the human body are interdependent and homeostatic, and a crisis in one system may manifest itself in another. This disguised manifestation may be difficult to trace back to its point of origin. If we take the symptoms at face value when we begin looking for causes of the difficulties, we may look in the wrong place.

With adult education, we might begin by investigating problems relating to articulations of the relevance of adult education. The current politico-economic paradigm assumes specific relationships between education, work and the economy. These assumptions affect the funding of opportunities for adults to learn and benefit from relevant education. The definition of the boundary between the academy and the world of work is one method by which relevance is determined and hegemonic control maintained. Adult education offers no competing definitions of relevance; it simply accepts the prevailing conceptualization. It is thereby co-opted by the state and becomes vulnerable to charges of 'irrelevance' if it does not restructure its knowledge base to match the restructured workplace. In this way the "system" of adult education is interdependent with the state "system" just as the systems of the body are interdependent, and the interdependency may mask the true source of problems.

Has the 'social movement' tradition in adult education been trampled in the rush to professionalization and the tendency to think increasingly of the delivery of expert services to individuals? Holford (1995) contends that "social movements remain a peripheral concern in the adult education literature" (p.97). The shift in priorities, from a movement with broad social goals to one of meeting individual needs, pushes the field to become increasingly entrepreneurial, reducing adult educators' knowledge and skills to a product or technology bought in the marketplace by the highest bidder (Cunningham 1988, p. 134). This entry into the market engages adult educators in a competitive struggle with business for new markets and clients.

Brookfield describes adult education as a field characterized by paradigmatic plurality (1987 p. 202). This plurality can be seen as the bedrock of adult education, but it may also be one of the reasons for the apparent lack of cohesion in understanding its roles and purposes. On one hand philosophical perspectives—ranging from logical positivism to humanism and social activism—influence the academic researchers, the problems they deem worthy of investigation, and debates about the extent to which adult educators should become involved in movements for social or community change (Brookfield 1987). On the other hand, practitioners—many unconcerned with theoretical or philosophical speculation—appear to shun what Monette (1979) describes as "the value choices underlying adult education practice" (in Brookfield 1987, p. 202). Collins warns that the "obsession with methodology and technique has become so embedded in adult education practice and research that many practitioners are no longer able to recognize the way it controls and shapes adult learning activities" (1991, p. 5). These statements epitomize the situation Lindeman identified sixty years ago; that

it seems inescapably clear that people do not know what we mean by adult education. ...As adult educators we have not been clear in our own minds, and consequently the situation with respect to motivation for adult learning is one of muddled confusion. (Lindeman 1938, p. 48).

Sixty years of confusion prompts one to question the future of adult education in an increasingly globalized society. Who, and where, are the adult educators ready to take a stand on the fundamental issues of the day?

### Diagnosing the problem

There can be little doubt that the traditional role of adult education in the education of citizens has given way to preparing learners for the demands of the economic system—from education for citizenship toward preparing people for occupational success. We have looked at some of the economic effects, can we return to Habermas to help diagnose adult education's shift in emphasis and purpose? Can we detect the etiology of the disease from its outward symptoms?

The first symptom is adult education's drive to professionalize and legitimate itself as a field of study within institutions of higher education. Legitimation required identifying a bounded set of knowledge it could claim as its own. Laying claim to a knowledge-base meant appropriating theories and knowledge from existing disciplines into a form that could be loosely identified as representing adult education. At the same time, the emerging field pursued legitimation through the production of a disciplinary discourse which identified research in the field of adult education as knowledge production. Finally, adult education could not be admitted to academe as a discipline; it had neither the cultural nor social capital of the well-established arts, sciences and humanities. The option was to seek legitimation as a professional field. After all, law, medicine, and theology—three of the four oldest professions—were well ensconced in the academy.

Early advocates played an important role in the development and legitimation of adult education as a field of study with respected scholars in the field appointed to editorial boards of publications to set standards and legitimate the knowledge disseminated. Articles reflected the emerging status of adult education in the academy. A recent review of literature from 1983 to 1992 (Rachal and Sargent 1995) documents the fecundity of adult educators, especially those in the larger programs, but tells us little about the rigor or content of the research published. And while Rachal and Sargent allude to the gatekeeping role or "editorial influence on a journal's content" (p. 74), and suggest the influence of publishers in which writings are accepted, they don't address what one professor has labeled the "Jossey-Bass-ification" of adult education.

So. Should editorial boards and publishers—the gatekeepers of adult education knowledge—be singled out for their contribution to the growing crisis of adult education? Possibly. But before a final diagnosis is reached another symptom requires investigating.

Consider those of us who gather at conferences to present our research to our peers, offering versions of our own constructed reality of what it means to be an adult educator on the eve of the new millennium. We are the adult education 'establishment'. What part do each of *us* play? Do we mask our responsibility by participating in the status quo? In the spirit of passengers on the Titanic, aren't we implying that nothing is wrong as long as 'the band continues to play'? Is it possible that the crisis in adult education manifesting itself today has its roots within each of *us*?

### Curing the Disease?

Perhaps the cost of winning a legitimate seat at the academic table has been too great. Perhaps we have over-invested in what Ben-Porath (1980) calls "reputational capital" (cited in Griliches 1997, p. S339). In the struggle for legitimation we seem to have divorced ourselves from our tradition of adult education geared to social justice. Those of us involved in the academic pursuit of adult education have become the highly privileged. Cunningham's warning of a decade ago—that [i]hose who "have" in society rarely see the need for change as clearly as those who "have not" (1988 p.136)—appears to have gone unheeded. Now the social gap between the *haves* and the *have-nots* is again widening into a chasm. Perhaps it is time to return to our traditional values. Adult education is something that we *do*, not something that we *have*, in a neat professionalized academic package. To restore the moribund body of adult education to robust health, to re-claim its emancipatory potential, social-justice values and social goals must return to the top of the adult education agenda.

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