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Rethinking Participation Research in Adult Education: International Perspectives

Sean Courtney, Veronica McGivney, John McIntyre, Kjell Rubenson (Chair)

Abstract. The purpose of this symposium is to analyze research on participation in adult education from an international perspective. Panelists will discuss findings from their respective parts of the world and consider how research and theory on this important phenomenon can be advanced.

Background, overview. The increased interest of governments world-wide in educational reform and the promotion of lifelong learning has stimulated renewed interest in the phenomenon of adult participation in a whole range of educational endeavors, both formal and informal. At the same time, major new surveys in the U.S., the U.K., and Australia have made their appearance. These suggest the perpetuation of 'inequities' so well documented in earlier surveys, even as they provoke new questions about who participates in adult education and why; the benefits of participation beyond the realm of vocational expediency; how the field of adult education as a whole is changing; and why participation related issues receive differential attention across the world. It is within this broader global-political context, that this symposium brings together, perhaps for the first time, a range of analytical perspectives on participation research from the U.S., Australia and the United Kingdom. The session will be chaired by Kjell Rubenson, a U.S. and European expert in the macro study of adult education and training.

Among the objectives of the symposium:

Reporting on recent participation research in different countries;
Theorizing the phenomenon from different perspectives;
Addressing commonalities among approaches and
Defining directions for future research.

Among the questions we would like to raise either in the various presentations or with the audience are the following:

Does it make sense to continue with a concept of participation which combines distinct social-demographic and educational sponsorship groups together?

What are alternative perspectives that can be deployed to theorize participation, including social and cultural analyzes?

What are the implications of viewing participation as a socio-cultural rather than psychological phenomenon?

Perspectives from the United States

Recent, and in some cases substantial, changes not only in the phenomenon of participation itself, but in the manner in which national studies are conducted and the relevant statistics are reported has created an opportunity for adults educators and educational researchers to debate the meaning of this body of work both for the discipline and theory of adult education as well as for its practice. Not since 1981, the last detailed survey of participation in Adult Education in the U.S., has the field had the opportunity of examining in detail the changing face of organized adult education in this country. Surveys undertaken in 1991 and 1995, both available for personal

analysis on CD-ROMs, suggest not only that participation as a national phenomenon has increased dramatically, but, perhaps, more significantly, that there may have been serious underestimation of participation in the past. At the same time, the decision by the National Center for Education Statistics to break down reporting of participation statistics into distinct educational subcategories highlights a possible new awareness that reports of overall rates of participation and their correlation with socio-demographic variables--the standard reporting procedure in the past--may have outlived their usefulness.

Two recent surveys of participation in adult education (PAE) in the U.S. peg overall rates at 33% (NHES, 1991) and 40% (NCES, 1995). Both figures would increase by around 5% if certain traditionally excluded categories (e.g. all those 17 and over taking part in university based programs whether full-time or part-time) were included. The figures on trends are no less dramatic. If we compare statistics from 1969, the year in which the first comparable federal surveys were conducted, with surveys undertaken in 1981, 1991 and 1995, the following profile emerges:

Gender: Males 'lost' to females between 1969 and 1984 and have not recovered as a proportion of the total participant group (46% vs. 54% in 1995);

Race/ethnicity The category of White participation has declined from a high of 92% (1969) to the current rate of 77%, while Black participation has edged slowly upwards from 7-10%. The most dramatic increases have been among Hispanics (from negligible in 1969 to 7% today, while for "Other", mainly Asian, the increase has been fivefold, though overall numbers are small.

Age-wise, PAE continues to be a game of the younger rather than older age cohorts, with the baby boomer category moving steadily through the ranks (the 17-34 age group was by far the largest category in 1969; now it is even with the 35-54 age grouping)

Education is among the most significant predictors of participation (in 1969 a mere 16% of those without high school diplomas took part in adult education; today that figure has been halved. Correspondingly, the figure with the most dramatic increase, from 20% in 1969 to 35% of the total PAE population in 1995, is among those with 1-3 years of college.

Those with higher incomes (making more than \$40,000 per annum) constitute almost half of all participants; while the same groups constituted less than 30% of the total in 1969.

Labor Force Status: As expected, participants are more likely to be employed than unemployed (a rate of 54% for those in the labor force vs. 25% for those not)

The three largest providers of instruction (approximately 17% a piece) in 1984 were: the two-year community college, the four-year college, and business and industry. Since then, the share of the first dropped to 13% in 1991 and 10% in 1995; the share of the second moved down to 13% and then rebounded to 19%; while for that of the latter--business--the trend was dramatically upwards to 28% in 1991, dropping to 21% by 1995

Statistics on reasons and motives for participation now provide a more complex picture with the separation of the participant population. As expected, the vocational motive continues to dominate the picture.

Preliminary figures on barriers to participation queried in the 1991 survey for the first time, indicate a surprising commonality of barriers for different demographic groups, with some important exceptions; one being in the area of child care which pits women strongly against men. (Source on the above, Courtney & Chanchem, 1997)

Now consider the implications of these varied findings. First, if overall rates of PAE have increased as dramatically as depicted--doubled between 1981 and 1991 and a further 7% between '91 and '95--this is quite contrary to the orderly increases we have been witnessing since 1969, (Courtney, 1992; Chimene, 1984). If true, where has the access population come from and who is providing it with instruction? Analysis of provider statistics suggest increases in some sponsor areas but not, apparently, on the order that would be required to explain the size of the increase. In attempting to account for this, the surveys' conductors have pointed to the likelihood that, for a variety of complex statistical reasons, the size of the increases may not be as dramatic as at first presumed. However, in doing so they have raised another question: the strong possibility that previous rate reports have been seriously underestimations of the true rate of PAE in this country. So, with respect to the condition of PAE in the U.S. we have a situation whereby we may not have received a true picture of the phenomenon since, possibly, 1965 when Johnstone and Rivera released their landmark study. At the same time, we, as a discipline and profession, do not have ready-to-hand explanations for the order of magnitude that we are now apparently witnessing.

This leads to a second consideration. Beginning in 1995, and continuing perhaps indefinitely, reporting for some of the key areas of the phenomenon is by category of participation only. Thus, while we continue to receive information on overall rates of participation with respect to the traditional demographic factors, e.g. gender, income, ethnicity, etc., these rates as they correlate with, e.g. motives and barriers, are not being provided. It is as if the appropriate federal body charged with eliciting this information has determined that, for all practical purposes, adult education is not a single overarching entity but a series of discrete categories of provision each replete with its own populations, sources of provision, and dynamic conditions pertaining to forms of activity. These areas as now determined by the government are: ESL, ABE/GED, Credential programs, Work-related courses, and Personal development courses. Break out reports from the federal government reflect these distinctions making it increasingly difficulty to speak about adult education as a unitary, integrated phenomenon. This symposium will address this and related questions.

On a macro level, the current profile of the learner taken in conjunction with the trend data suggest important and perhaps fundamental consistencies about the nature of PAE in this country, with respect to demographics such as education, income and the like. There is clearly a side to adult education which makes it a 'young person's game,' which ties adult education to occupational and social mobility and which in very culturally specific ways reflects the average American's pursuit of individual identity. At the same time, new 'players' have appeared on the scene (consider, for example, the rise in education provided by private community, religious and a host of other organizational forms), even as traditional sources of provision remain steady and even decline in importance. What is the significance of these trends for adult education practice?

Conceptual and Theoretical Issues. Clearly, we need to revisit how we are conceptualizing PAE. It is somewhat of an irony that when Burton Kreitlow called for a rethinking of the phenomenon back in the early 1970s, he was concerned that we had been too sociological. Today, of course, our concern is that orientation to the subject precludes the larger socio-cultural dimension that would give meaning to what will always appear, given the nature of the American ideology, as a function of individual decision-making. The recent effort to provide the field with its own

sociology, e.g. the work of Rubenson, coupled with attempts to create a more complex sociology of educational phenomena, e.g. by including the works of Anthony Giddens, gives us hope here. However, it has to be said that as long as we remain at the level of theory without the concomitant support of empirical data, we cannot expect our understanding of this complex psychological as well as socio-cultural phenomenon to be advanced. Surprisingly, our journals, with few exceptions, contain no examples of substantive aggregate and subcategorical analysis of modern PAE in the U.S. Surely, it is difficult for right thinking men and women to expect to advance arguments for or reach consensus on various remedies to perceived national problems, without some more fundamental understanding of the vagaries of the phenomenon as these have been traced by successive federal studies.

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Perspectives from Australia

Since 1992 there has been a flood of research on participation in research on adult education in Australia, stimulated by several factors (1) the high priority which government has given to education and training reform (2) recognition of adult community education as a 'sector' following an inquiry by the Senate of the Federal Parliament (Senate 1992) and (3) the lobbying work of professional associations, including activities such as Adult Learners Week.

Surveys of participation divide into (1) those which examine adult course-taking across a range of providers including employers such as the studies commissioned by the AAACE (Evans, 1994; McIntyre & Crombie, 1996), and (2) those which examine community-based adult education under the aegis of state adult education authorities (e.g. ACFE, 1995; McIntyre, Foley, Morris & Tennant, 1995). The term 'adult education' refers to a broad spectrum of provision with an ambiguous relationship to formal systems of vocational and higher education. By and large this research has shown that those most likely to participate in any form of 'adult education' are relatively advantaged in their education, employment and income. A key national survey (McIntyre & Crombie, 1996) showed one in four adults had taken a short course within the last year, that men and women appear equally likely to have participated, though participation declines sharply in older people. Half the courses taken were provided by an employer, union or industry association. The higher the occupational group, the higher educational level and personal income, the more likely it is that someone participates. Studies of community-based provision have shown the preponderance of women, and their potential to reach disadvantaged individuals, as well as typical age, education, occupation and employment profiles (McIntyre Foley Morris & Tennant, 1995).

The point of much of this research has been to put 'adult education' on the policy map, as the state intervenes to reshape education and training (McIntyre 1997). The research has been expected to demonstrate the meanings of participation for key policy agendas. These include (1) the vocationalism agenda, of increasing the skills of the workforce and (2) the equity or social justice agenda, of widening participation education and training and increasing access to jobs. However, it has also addressed (3) a professionalization agenda, where the 'sector' of providers has attempted to gain recognition and better resourcing by government by contributing to vocational and equity outcomes.

Conceptual and theoretical issues. Because of the social and economic interests of the policy context, research has moved away from a psychological view of participation found in the North American literature. All the evidence on typical adult participants suggests that participation represents social and cultural choices. Participation can be understood in simplistic terms as the result of individual motives or dispositions, but this is to ignore key political and economic questions about who participates, in what kinds of institutions to what ends, and who pays.

There have been a number of developments in Australian research which are contributing to social and cultural perspectives on participation. These include: (1) the use of well-developed typologies of courses, motives and learners so that relationships in participation can be modeled; (2) an emphasis on the 'knowledge factor' in course choices, recognizing that participants choose to participate in a course in a particular field of study; (3) an emphasis on participation by clienteles and communities, or understanding how specific types of participants choose to engage in particular types of types of courses, in given localities and under given conditions of provision (4) bringing survey methodologies together with provider case studies and community analysis.

This broader approach has led us to emphasize some neglected questions surrounding the nature of the adult education agencies and their community context as factors in participation - to understand participation in terms of an 'ecology of provision'. An ecological analysis sees participation patterns as the result of an interplay of government funding regimes, provider cultures and strategies, the demands of adult learner clienteles and the character of the 'community' being served. One recent study applied this approach to study differences in participation at the postcode level in Sydney and NSW drawing on data about the finances of provider organizations, statistics on their participants and local area census data (McIntyre, Brown & Ferrier 1997).

This study showed how the broader political economic factors shape the ecology of provision. The 'marketization' of education has accentuated the nature of adult education as a 'user-pays' system. To survive financially in this system, agencies target relatively advantaged clienteles who are concentrated in particular localities and have a capacity to pay for the courses they want at a given level of fees. In the absence of a funding regime which requires equity outputs, participation is narrowed to clienteles resident in more affluent areas and advantaged in terms of qualifications, employment and income. The needs and interests of these clienteles then shape the content and culture of provision. Provision and participants are mutually shaping. This provides one explanation for the participant profiles that are typical of institutionalized adult education.

Conclusion: Rethinking participation. In this perspective, participation research needs to recognize the diversity of institutional forms of provision and examine how these cater to different types of clienteles. Studies should examine the social and cultural conditions which set the context for provision, especially those which limit opportunities for disadvantaged individuals to participate. In turn, research should turn attention to the forms and practices of provision. Researchers should vigorously reassert the value of participation research, for several reasons. (1) The policy emphasis on formal participation occurring in developed economies under the rubric of 'lifelong learning' should lead us to ask what this participation represents. (2) The restructuring of post-school educational institutions, by marketization, internationalization

and other forces, direct attention to the nature of institutions as changing contexts for adult learning. Not only educational institutions, but workplaces and other organizational contexts can be examined as sites of participation. (3) A third is the need to give social and cultural context to 'adult learning' which for too long has been defined in psychological and individualistic terms.

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Perspectives from the United Kingdom

Participation research in Britain has focused typically on identifying the characteristics, motives and attitudes of the groups who engage in post compulsory education and training and the barriers that deter those who do not. It involves mainly national polls of representative samples of the population and individual area-based, institution-based or subject-based studies that can be both quantitative and qualitative. During the last few years, further and higher education institutions have been required to produce more detailed student data than ever before. Although not as in-depth as some might wish, the statistics enable institutions to identify with more precision than previously the characteristics of their student body, beyond the blanket descriptors of age, gender and race, and provide the baseline data they need to inform policy and recruitment strategies.

The picture emerging from such studies reflects to some extent the major social and economic changes that have taken place over the last decades, in particular the far greater involvement of women in the labor force. Recent participation patterns have also been shaped by educational policy, particularly the stress on vocationalism and accreditation and the requirement for further and higher education institutions to achieve specified growth without increased funding. In response to all these factors and increased ease of access, there has been a sharp increase in the numbers of adult learners (as opposed to school and sixth-form leavers who are generally aged 16 and 18 respectively) entering colleges and universities. Over half of students in further education are aged over 25. These include people without standard entrance qualifications, people from the lower socio-economic groups and members of ethnic minority communities. Women are now the majority of students in further education and make up nearly 50 per cent of those in higher education.

At the same time labor force surveys suggest that more people than before are being offered work-related training by their employers and this is heralded as a move towards lifelong learning. However, the statistics can be misleading and suggest more advances than have actually been made. For all the words spoken and written about lifelong learning, we are still light years away from achieving it. The national PAE survey conducted for NIACE in 1996 revealed that about 60 per cent had not been engaged in any formal or informal learning activity during the previous three years and 36 per cent had not engaged in any organized learning since leaving school. Of the 40 per cent who were participants:

The highest participation rates were among the younger cohorts and those in the highest socio-economic categories; the lowest were among older adults and those in the lowest socio-economic groups.

About 60 per cent of those who had left school at age 18 were current or recent learners compared with 20 per cent of those who had left school below 16

and 39 per cent of those who had left at age 16-17.

The majority of current learners were likely to continue learning: 81 per cent of those who had not engaged in learning since leaving school said they were unlikely to participate in the future.(Tuckett and Sargant, 1996)

This prompted the conclusion that: "the UK is increasingly two nations: one convinced of the value of learning (...); the other choosing not to join the learning society." (Tuckett and Sargant, 1996). The survey showed that the key factors involved in participation continue to be length of initial schooling, age and socio-economic status. Another important factor is prior participation: adults who have already engaged in learning are more likely to continue than those who have not, confirming the common finding that participation in post compulsory learning is a continuing rather than remedial or catching-up activity.

Data from the different education and training sectors confirm this picture. Statistics indicate that individuals, and especially men, from an unskilled, manual working background are conspicuously underrepresented in further education and that, despite the expansion of higher education, the overall social profile of students has not substantially changed. Employer-supported training still chiefly benefits higher educated workers in higher status positions (Blundell, Dearden and Meghir, 1996). Qualification levels are lowest among one of the most rapidly growing clusters of the workforce - part-time workers and although we have some (extremely modest) national targets to improve qualification levels, the annual increase in achievement of the targets designed for adults has been minuscule (less than one per cent in 1994-95).

A number of factors account for this situation among which I would single out cultural factors and glaring contradictions in policy which mean that while education and training have ostensibly become more accessible, certain aspects of economic and employment policy still prevent many - especially those who are on welfare benefits - from taking advantage of the opportunities available. Nevertheless widening participation and encouraging 'lifelong learning' have become a preoccupation of both the last and the current government, prompted by worries about the number of welfare claimants, unemployment and changing labor market conditions, and continuing evidence that, in some respects, we are less well educated than people in other western nations. Under the last government a number of lifelong learning initiatives were launched and a committee set up to examine widening participation in further education. Funding was also made available to increase nontraditional student access to higher education.

The new government is strongly committed to improving educational standards and has launched its own crop of initiatives. These are characterized by partnerships between the different sectors and include the establishment of 'individual learning accounts'; a 'New Deal' involving education, training and employment options specifically for young unemployed people and lone parents; a (probably misnamed) 'University for Industry' which will offer distance learning in the workplace, the home and community settings to those unable or unwilling to study in conventional settings, and the establishment of 'education action zones' in disadvantaged areas. In addition, a special advisory group on Lifelong Learning was set up last year and has produced a report which will inform a long-awaited White (policy) Paper (now due in February 1998).

As with the last government, the stress is on improving individual 'employability' rather than any broader educational objectives (although references are also frequently made to education for citizenship). There is also an ostensible concern with 'social exclusion'. Nevertheless, some policies, such as the recent decision to abolish maintenance grants for higher education students and to charge tuition fees, appear more likely to narrow than broaden participation. As the new programs are only just being piloted, it is too early to gauge their overall impact. Later this year it should be possible to see whether the new initiatives will achieve the objective of widening participation or whether, like former projects, they will have a limited and marginal impact on just a few individuals.

But in order to change participation in any meaningful way we need a different research emphasis. Given the fact that the majority of adult learners have similar characteristics despite the cultural diversity of the population, together with strong evidence that many forms of post compulsory learning do not attract large segments of the population, what is needed is more emphasis on *difference*: on identifying the different educational requirements and interests of non learning groups and the recruitment methods, curriculum approaches and learning methodologies that would most appeal to them. For once schools are leading the way. In response to mounting concern about the ever-widening gap in achievement between girls and boys, some are piloting new approaches to working with boys. Such research would be timely. The availability of central funding to 'widen participation' is leading further and higher education institutions to seek ways of reaching out to the wider community and some very obviously don't have a clue where to start.

Another useful research direction would be to examine participation in education less as a separate phenomenon but as something that is intimately interlinked with other dimensions - social and personal - of a person's life. Some of the most interesting data on participation patterns and outcomes are emerging not from PAE surveys but from longitudinal cohort studies - the National Child Development Study - involving successive surveys of over 17,000 people born in a single week in 1958 - and a similar exercise involving a cohort born in 1970 - the 1970 British Cohort Study. These are providing invaluable evidence of the combined impact of personal, social, economic and educational factors on the development and life chances of individuals.

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