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# Revisiting the Map of the Territory

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**Abstract:** *The purpose of this study was to revisit the article The Map of the Territory, written twenty years ago. The analysis is based on a review of major journals, conference proceedings and some key books. The review reveals how the landscape is being shifted by paradigmatic changes in the social sciences and the broadening of the boundary of adult education practice. The separation of empirically and normatively informed arguments is seen as a major problem for the drawing of the map.*

## Background and Purpose

In my 1982 article, *Adult Education Research: In Quest of a Map of the Territory*, I set out to analyse what governed knowledge production in adult education. Departing from Törnebohm's epistemological perspective, the purpose of the study was to analyse what had governed the drawing of the map (the knowledge production) in adult education by 1982. I attempted to answer the following questions:

1. Which assumptions and perceptions of the territory govern the efforts to accumulate knowledge within adult education, that is, which questions are regarded as legitimate within the academic field?
2. Which research traditions, i.e., scholarly ideals, epistemology and perspectives govern the research efforts in adult education?

The study concluded that:

- there was an overwhelming influence of psychology with the consequence that the territory of adult education research was defined primarily through assumptions of the characteristics of the learner and, thus, teaching was reduced to learning,
- issues of adult education practice were mainly approached from an actor/agent perspective,
- empiricism and research methodology was emphasised in order to build a discipline of adult education,
- there was strong scepticism against borrowing from other disciplines and fields of study, and

- North American scholars dominated the landscape with little international exchange.

The article further concluded that claims for the growing intra-disciplinary importance of adult education research had been accepted too readily, and partly on false premises.

Nearly twenty years have passed since that article was written, and dramatic shifts have taken place in the social sciences and humanities as well as in the boundaries of adult education that profoundly impact on the territory of the map. The purpose of this paper is to return to the original questions and begin to discuss the changes that have occurred and reflect on the re-writing of the map. It should be recognised that an account like this is highly biased. Although there might be agreement on the major structural and intellectual changes that have occurred, there certainly will be fundamental differences in the assessment on how these have affected the map.

## Bodies of Literature Analysed

The choice of material strongly influences answers to the questions posed. The 1982 analysis of the map of the territory chose North America as a point of departure. The decision was motivated by the dominant role it had come to play in setting the boundaries of adult education as a field of study. However, over the past 20 years there has been, as Cunningham (1991) observes, a strong international influence on the development of knowledge in adult education. It was therefore decided to include more material from outside North America. The discus-

sion is primarily based on analyses of three kinds of material: journals, conference proceedings and books focusing on scholarly accomplishments in the field.

**Journals:** *Adult Education Quarterly*, *International Journal of Lifelong Learning*, *Studies in the Education of Adults*, *Studies in Continuing Education*, and *Adult Education Research in Nordic Countries*.

**Proceedings:** AERC, CASAE, European Society for Research on the Teaching of Adults (ESREA), SCUTREA, Nordic Research Conference and the 1988 and 1997 joint AERC-SCUTREA-CASAE-ESREA conferences.

**Books:** *Adult Education: Evolution and Achievements in a Developing Field* (1991); *Theoretical Issues in Adult Education – Danish Research Experiences* (1996), *The Biographical Approach in European Adult Education* (1995), *Adult Education and the Postmodern Challenge* (1997), and *Adult Education Research in the Federal Republic of Germany* (1992).

**Other:** Re-analysis of material collected by UNESCO for the review of adult education research.

### **The Changing Landscape of the Social Sciences**

At the centre is the collapse of empiricist and normal science and the competition for new approaches and issues that alternately chart the frontiers of the adult education landscape. These developments should be understood in the larger context of social conditions that shape the production of social scientific knowledge traditions (Popkewitz, 1984). In this paper it is possible only to list some key developments in the social sciences.

#### *Critical Theory*

The structural functional tradition, rooted in a consensus paradigm, came under severe criticism in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which saw a revival of the intellectual contribution of the work of Marx and Engels. Critical theory, strongly influenced by the Frankfurt School and Jurgen Habermas, came to play an important role in sociology and education. Scholars working in this tradition focused on how

the education system reproduces and legitimates the ubiquitous power structures in society and reproduces the prevailing class structure of society. There appeared a flurry of critical writings on the state (see e.g. Carnoy & Levin, 1985; Dale, 1989; Sarup, 1982, 1983).

#### *Post-modernism and Post-structuralism*

Inspired by French philosophers like Baudrillard, Derrida, Lacan and Lyotard, and borrowing from arts and literary criticism, post-modernists' argument that modernity has been replaced by the post-modern condition, with its interest in virtual reality, is having an important impact on the social sciences. Foucault's criticism of grand narratives, as presented in Critical Theory, and the refusal to accept any theory of knowledge or theory as better than another have laid the foundation for a focus on cultural politics of difference (Halsey, Lauder, Brown and Wells, 1997 p 13). Post-structuralist analyses have come to take centre stage in education and sociology and Habermasian 'critique' is being replaced by Foucauldian "genealogy."

#### *Feminist Scholarly Traditions*

The emergence of a second-wave feminist movement in the late 1960s has had a profound impact on the social sciences. Previously, gender was mostly invisible in sociological and educational knowledge but feminist research, often rooted in post-modern traditions, have brought the struggle of women and people of colour to the fore. Feminist scholars raised new theoretical questions and examined the gendered nature of institutions such as the state, economies, families, schools, politics and sexuality (Laslett and Thorne, 1997, p 6). They also challenged dominant understandings about the epistemologies and methodologies of research. In the words of Uri Ram (1995, p. 149), feminist scholarship has become *one of the most prolific and vigorous branches of social and cultural studies*.

### **The Changing Landscape of Adult Education Practice**

Adult education is regarded as a "practical discipline" where the goal is to give practitioners better control over factors associated with the problems they face. Changes in the boundary and focus of

adult education practice are central to an understanding of the redrawing of the map. It is therefore important to note that the most profound change in the landscape of adult education over the last twenty years is an influence perhaps best characterised as “the long arm of the job.” Since the mid-1980s, the role of education in wealth creation has come to dominate policy discussions, and adult education and training is being promoted as the answer to unemployment or declining productivity. This development is reflected in participation figures where the dominant role of employer-sponsored adult education and training is most evident. This coincides with a noticeable change from a narrow focus on the education and training system, to the broader perspective of lifelong learning. In the present economically driven agenda, workplace learning has taken centre stage and is promoted under slogans like learning organizations.

The focus on the so-called ‘Knowledge Economy’ is affecting not only the field of adult education but also its relationship to other disciplines and fields of study. Issues on adult learning that traditionally have been left to adult education are now spreading across neighbouring disciplines like economics, organizational sciences, etc. To take one example, Lundwall (1988) talks about “learning by interacting” to describe how product innovations occur via the experiences of customers and suppliers.

### **The Current Map**

In this paper it is only possible to very briefly report on some of the general impressions coming out of the review.

#### *Shifting Paradigm and Practice*

As can be expected, the map is changing with the general drift of the social sciences. With a considerable delay, broad shifts are being reflected in the adult education literature. What is interesting to note is the extent to which changes in “fashion” come to dominate scholarly ideals, epistemology and the perspectives that govern the research efforts in adult education research. Adult education seems inclined to throw out what has been dominant and replace it with what is in fashion. The shift to a post-structural tradition has helped make gender – and to some extent race and sexual-orientation – clearly visible

on the map. At the same time traditional adult education concerns with social class, equality and justice do not seem to play the same role in the literature. The broad paradigmatic shifts are more visible in thought pieces than in empirical work.

The new economic paradigm that governs education is having a major impact on the map. Over the last decade an increasing number of articles and conference presentations address issues like learning organizations, skills and employability. This work has helped foster a broader conceptualisation of learning.

#### *The Separation of Empirically and Normatively Informed Arguments*

The review suggests that the contributions in adult education fall into three separate, and quite distinct, categories: well-developed normative statements on practice and desirable social conditions; small empirical studies of isolated phenomena; and shorter thought pieces. The first category usually appears in the form of books, while the other two are more often found in journal articles and proceedings. Most striking is the lack of major empirical research programs. This has resulted in a separation of theory and empirical research and, related to this, a hesitancy to engage empirically in fundamental issues of a learning nature currently facing society. There is a dearth of what Jackall and Vidich (1995: vii) label “theory” as informed framing of intellectual problems about concrete social issues and the resolution of those problems through the analysis of empirical data. The interest here is not in the construction of abstract paradigms, theories and models as such, but rather the investigation of concrete social phenomena. The concern over the lack of a theoretical base in some quarters of adult education has resulted in a preoccupation with abstract theory building.

#### *The Absence of the State*

Issues around policy and the state are rarely addressed in the adult education literature. This is particularly true in North America, where despite a very strong emphasis on contributing to the practice of adult education, the concept of policy seldom appears. It is interesting to note that when issues like the relationship between theory and practice, or disseminating and using adult education knowledge, are

being addressed in the North American literature one commonly uses terminology like practitioners, professionals, educators, instructors and/or administrators but omits policy makers. This neglect might be related to the field's reluctance to embrace more structural perspectives in the explanation of adult education practice. This is partly true also of those working within a critical theory tradition. Their interest lies more in the Habermasian colonization of the lifeworld than in addressing the role of the state in determining the opportunity structures of adults, or the impact of the state on adult education practices. Further, the recent interest in post-structuralism in adult education helps to keep issues around the state submerged. When power is addressed it tends to be from a Foucauldian perspective that focuses on discourses and the procedures that control them. In Foucault's analysis, power is neither an attribute of class nor is it identified with the state. In the present excitement in adult education scholarly circles over globalisation we must remember Carnoy's (1990) observation that there are crucial differences in what adult education attempts to do and what it can actually do in different social-political structures. This is well illustrated in the recent International Adult Literacy Survey, where national differences in adults' engagement in learning as well as the distribution of literacy in the population can be explained in terms of differences in welfare state regimes.

### **The Emphasis on Being a "Practical" Field of Study**

Despite repeated concerns over a lack of theory in adult education over the last 20 years, accumulation of knowledge continues to be based almost solely on efforts to improve the practice of adult education. Although the response differs from country to country, one can find the same stress on practicality and the needs of the field. North American adult education research has for the last two decades conducted applied research focusing on program and administrative problems as well as teaching. ESREA's review of trends in adult education research in Europe shows that not only has practice-related research dominated, but there is a general move towards a predominance of applied research. This is linked to changes in the funding structure for

research with funds being shifted to contract research in specific areas defined by governmental bodies and councils for adult education. Further research in adult education in Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of the Eastern Block has become more rare and the focus today is almost exclusively on the applicability of research. An emphasis on practical aspects is also evident in the Nordic countries. However, the tradition in these countries of basing educational reforms on prior official inquiry has resulted in policy oriented research addressing not only narrow educational issues but also broader societal issues.

Recognising that adult education has firmly remained a practical discipline, it is worth noting that the renewal of faculty is pushing the field in a more theoretical direction. While a large number of the early faculty members in university departments of adult education were recruited on the basis of considerable experience within the field, recent professors are hired more on the basis of academic backgrounds and bring with them scholarly traditions.

### *Borrowing*

At the time the original *Map of the Territory* was published, borrowing from other disciplines and fields of study was a contentious issue that divided the scholarly community. Over the last twenty years there appears to have been a major change in attitude. First there does not seem to be any debate in recent literature on its advantages and disadvantages. Rather in a post-modern tradition there is increasing appreciation of the fact that adult learning takes place in various contexts. Rather than being afraid of other fields, attempts are being made to include scholars from other fields interested in education of adults. Judging from the publications in adult education journals this does not seem to have been very successful, and does not add much to the visible map.

### *One Map or Several Regional Maps*

Despite the fact that research in North America and Europe is equally instrumental in nature, there are rather obvious epistemological differences. Most obvious is a stronger emphasis on psychologically oriented theories in North America and, in relative

terms, a greater preoccupation with social theory in Europe. These differences should be understood in the larger context of social and cultural traditions and their impact on research traditions (Popkewitz, 1984, p. 6). The society of the United States, with its decentralized political and economic system and individual emphasis on social mobility, promotes a research focus on the individual. The strong emphasis on psychologically oriented theories by North American adult education researchers is consistent with the dominant tradition in educational research in general. To use Kuhn's concept of paradigm at the meta level, the tradition within adult education research is part of the dominant 'Weltanschauung.' The same is true of European research, the only difference being in the 'Weltanschauung' that governs the research tradition. In this respect it is interesting to note how journals, such as *Adult Education Quarterly* and *Studies in the Education of Adults*, are as different in nature today as they were twenty years ago. If anything, the differences seem more pronounced now than earlier.

### Concluding Comments

Today we are in a situation that might be labelled "the paradoxical status of adult education research." This alludes to the puzzling fact that while lifelong learning – including adult education and training – is increasingly being promoted as the new Jerusalem and the panacea to most problems facing society, the adult education map is not seen as gaining more recognition within the social sciences. How is it that while adult learning is becoming crucial to broad segments of society the traditional bastion for adult education research seems irrelevant to the very same groups? The challenge now is how to incorporate segments of the map being developed in neighbouring areas of research.

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