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Adult Education for a Civil Society: Starting Over

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Abstract: *To “start over” adult educators need to reexamine the present practice of adult education and community development in Canada, as compared to our earlier ideals for the field that included the promotion of greater democracy, social equality and equitable economic opportunities for all Canadians. In this reassessment, we need to consider the broader potential of our community agencies, as sites for revitalizing our civil society.*

Community agencies are significant sites for the delivery of non-formal adult education, which they usually describe as a community service or community program. These activities often take the form of imparting information on basic needs: food, housing, education/training and the search for employment.

On occasion community agencies run programs that support people in their claim for basic legislated rights and entitlements. These programs may have a strong community development component and may provide a forum for the traditional goals of adult educators in Canada as those who “sought social change, greater democracy, social equality and equitable economic opportunities for all Canadians, particularly the most powerless and underprivileged” (Cassidy & Farris, 1987, p. 3).

These community development-related projects would seem to have immense potential for creating a process through which emancipatory adult education could take place. Such adult education projects would be helping to create a more democratic and egalitarian society, as was hoped for by the Canadian Association for Adult Education’s 1986 Declaration of Citizenship and Adult Learning. Cassidy (1987) quotes from the Declaration,

As members of communities and of broader social movements, adult educators must join with, and learn from, all those Canadians who seek full citizenship, personal growth, and social betterment. Canadian adult educators must strengthen their historic role of working within communities to create environmentally sound, sustainable local economic development. By fostering co-operative working and learning relationships, adult educators can assist Canadians to prepare more effectively for the future. (p. 5)

Such a stance implies a willingness to advocate with and for disenfranchised community members as they learn to see the potential of their communities. However, of the community agencies we consulted, all of which have a formal commitment to community development, advocacy by and for the “powerless and underprivileged” is not usually embedded in their community development projects. The result is the splitting off of the “political” from the “practical”. Politicized advocacy tends to happen only when a crisis breaks over an agency’s community and outside the flow of the agency’s main funded activities.

This situation results in the “restructuring” of community development as another service – productive and useful but not critical of the power-relations that contribute to poverty and exclusion. That in turn ensures that most program curricula are created with minimal participation from the adult constituency of participants.

The structure of funding and the fear of loss of funding are the main modes by which community development and adult education projects in community agencies are disciplined toward a practice of compliant pragmatism. Funding tends to be short-term and unstable in the sense that renewal is not to be counted on even in the case of project success. Continuity and community confidence are often impossible to sustain under such circumstances.

Reporting requirements are often lengthy and energy absorbing. More and more staff time is spent applying for funds and accounting for their use. Accountability itself is often demanded in terms of narrowly defined “product” measured in “quantifiable” terms that undermine and devalue participatory processes and the struggle for progressive social change. Private sector sponsorships and partnerships entail their own conservatizing limitations,

both explicit and implicit.

A widespread fear of de-funding has produced a “chill” in support at the agency level for community development or advocacy projects that may be deemed politically inappropriate by very conservative institutional forces. Whether this is an exaggerated response to the current neo-liberal political climate in Ontario or a realistic assessment of the probable consequences of being seen to defy the political order is unclear. But there is considerable anecdotal evidence of reprisals for harbouring an active critique of the status quo. One large funding bureaucracy was extensively restructured from the top down apparently as a response to “excessive liberalism” manifested by a grant that indirectly benefited a militant youth group concerned about racism. The group to whom the grant was made was subsequently defunded and another sponsoring or-

ganization subjected to an openly hostile review. Such events reinforce the other circumstances leading agencies away from “greater democracy and social equality” as project goals and toward service-oriented, “quantifiable” compliant pragmatism.

To “start over” we need to realistically re-think the possibilities for adult education as part of the movement for social justice in Canada and, in particular, the situation of community agencies as front-line community educators.

References

- Cassidy, F. (1987) Adult learning and citizenship. In F. Cassidy, & R. Farris, (Eds.). *Choosing our future: Adult education and public policy in Canada*. (pp. 2-10). Toronto: O.I.S.E. Press.