

# Conversations With Long-Time Adult Educators

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## **Conversations With Long-Time Adult Educators**

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**Abstract: The purpose of this study was to collect and analyze information from long-time adult educators, to learn from their experiences, and to ensure the wisdom they have gained throughout their time spent in the field is not lost.**

### **Introduction**

As a field of study and practice, adult education is unique in that it is both an entity unto itself and a process that impacts and permeates most aspects of our democratic society. As a result, several philosophical perspectives defining what should and should not be considered true adult education have evolved. Tracing the history of adult education in the United States illustrates how and why the field developed (Essert, 1967; Knowles, 1977). It helps clarify the vital role that the education and enlightenment of adults plays in the continuing success of a democratic society.

Many texts have been written for the purpose of tracing the history and identifying the different philosophical aspects of adult education (Merriam and Brockett, 1997). At times, controversy has been evoked among adult education professionals as the field has evolved and branched in multiple directions. Based on the dissimilarity of views sometimes held by second and third generation adult educators, current practitioners and students often grapple with questions regarding the most pressing issues for the present needs and future directions in the field. Gathering the wisdom and experiences of these long-time adult educators can provide us with invaluable lessons. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to collect and analyze information from the most senior members of the field of adult education, to learn from their experiences, and to ensure the wisdom they have gained throughout their time spent in the field is not lost.

### **Research Design**

In order to gain an in-depth understanding of the field of adult education as seen through the eyes of its practitioners over the past 40 to 60 years, a basic or generic qualitative format was determined most appropriate (Merriam, 1998). Specifically, we were interested in the cumulative wisdom that adult education professionals have gained across the years. By collecting and analyzing their reflective perspectives, we hoped to learn from their accumulated experiences. Beyond simple facts, our purpose was to engage the participants and relate to them regarding their passions, concerns, and goals in the field. Questions and discussions were framed around four general themes: influences that shaped careers, philosophical perspectives, changes in the

field, and future perspectives. Beyond these areas, it was anticipated that additional themes might emerge.

### *Participant Selection*

Individuals chosen for this study were adult educators who have been formally involved in the field throughout North America for at least 40 years and whose role in the field was confirmed through published work or position of responsibility or leadership. A priority list of possible participants was developed after reviewing the published literature and seeking suggestions from colleagues in the field. Participants were contacted and asked to complete a written questionnaire, which was followed up by a telephone or in-person interview. A list identifying each of the participants appears at the end of this paper.

## **Findings**

Following is a summary of the six themes that emerged from the analysis of questionnaires and interviews. This includes the four original research questions and two emergent themes.

### *What were the major influences that shaped their careers?*

Several names recurred throughout many of the responses, but the one person most frequently mentioned was Cyril Houle. Other individuals mentioned less frequently, included George Aker, Wayne Schroeder, Malcolm Knowles, Roby Kidd, Ivan Illich, and Paolo Freire. Beyond specific individuals, other influences listed were world-changing events such as wars and the civil rights movement.

### *What were their philosophical perspectives and have they changed?*

Though some of the respondents were able to put their philosophies succinctly into words, others' philosophies had to be derived from the content of the interviews and questionnaires. Very few of the respondents indicated that their philosophies had changed over the course of their careers.

### *Where do they feel the field is headed and why?*

Most participants expressed a belief that the changes they are seeing in adult education indicate the direction of the field. Some of the educators embraced the changes, while others saw it as the "death knell" of adult education as a field of study and practice.

### *How did they enter the field of adult education?*

Almost none of the individuals reported having intentionally entered the field of adult education. Instead, they discussed their entry as having been through a variety of occupations and pursuits, many using terms such as having "fallen" into the practice of adult education.

### *What are they doing in retirement?*

A small number of our respondents were still employed as professors, but the majority considered themselves retired. What we discovered through our interviews, however, was that even though most were officially retired, they remained involved in some form of adult education. One of the most common pursuits was to use their skills to support their communities

or religious organizations. Researching and writing was also a frequently mentioned activity among the group.

*What changes have they seen during their involvement in the field?*

This issue emerged as the most polarizing for the majority of the respondents. Therefore, after reviewing our original findings, we re-contacted the participants and asked that they review the following statement and react to the question below:

*The field of adult education has evolved from 1926 to its present form and continues to evolve and shape itself as the demands of the culture change. Reactions to this evolution from the participants of our study varied from excitement about the possibilities to frustration over the "abandonment" of earlier ideals. The most controversial aspect in regards to the modern practice of adult education is related to the inclusion of Human Resource Department (HRD) practitioners into the field. Some of our participants felt that the true "spirit" of adult education as a means to foster democracy and the development of an enlightened society is rapidly losing ground to the high tech arena of HRD training and compulsory learning.*

*How do you feel about this statement and what do you think members of the field should be doing in order to enhance the future of Adult Education?*

## **Discussion**

Upon our examination of the philosophies espoused by our participants regarding the changes in Adult Education, we were able to classify them into two major philosophical categories. The first group is comprised of those that saw adult education as a means to social reforms, which according to them, was the original or traditional purpose of adult education. These traditionalists were particularly disturbed by the current involvement by adult educators in HRD initiatives. The second group consists of persons who focused on the needs of the individuals, embracing a more humanistic approach to the field of adult education. There were several individuals who embraced both of these philosophies.

Of the two groups, the traditionalists were the most clear about their philosophical beliefs and were not hesitant to state that they were radicals. One individual, for example, described himself as "...a radical, democratic individualist socialist seeking spiritual approaches to reach a fundamentally improved society." Others like him are the individuals who are the "disciples" of Paolo Freire and Ivan Illich. Like Freire, whose early work involved educating Latin American peasants in order to liberate them from oppressive regimes, these individuals want to educate adults to take charge of their destinies. "We need to make people understand the goals of Adult Education, to foster a person's Agency and Democracy ... we need to hold on to those convictions and share them." This same person asserts that the field is becoming "...too focused on compulsory education, making money, (and) certification" and that graduate programs are much more about making money, not about the original ideals of the field. Another respondent concurs by emphasizing his beliefs that "real adult education is non-institutionalized, voluntary efforts to bring about change that is not necessarily in the interest of the power group." Yet

another person declared that "HRD training is all about social control." And still another asks: "Why aren't we training our people to know what is needed to be done for democracy in the world? And making them all feel that its part of their heritage and responsibility."

One of these individuals feels that the changes seen in adult education today are more the consequence of universities than society or HRD. "As the Adult Education Departments grow and mature, the emphasis strays from our democratic beginnings to an emphasis on bean counting ... When we become most like the other departments in a University we can be fairly confident that we have lost our souls."

The second group, whom we will call globalists, took a more universal perspective of the field and sought to embrace learning in all forms. One participant stated that "...the mission of Adult Education is to assist adults to acquire further control of their current circumstances and their future destinies." He views the increased commitment to education under various titles, traditional or HRD, as an "expansion of learning opportunities for all adults in all aspects of society" and envisions increased opportunities for all adults and greater academic recognition. Another individual believes that it is important for the field to keep up with changes in our culture. He admitted that "At first I was hesitant to encourage HRDers into the field. That was wrong, they too will be out of date in time." Still another views his role as a professor to enhance the individual student's efforts to define his or her own integrity and area of responsibility. He also was concerned about detrimental effects that traditionalists might inflict on the field of adult education by insisting on a one-dimensional vision of its purpose.

One respondent expressed his respect for learners as self-directing and of involvement of learners in deciding their program. He also supported the inclusion of training professionals under the adult education umbrella, was positive about the use of technology in meeting the needs of the adult learner, and was excited about organizations like the American Society of Trainers and Developers (ASTD) because of what they bring to the field. However, his greatest regret was that adult education had not done an "adequate job of meeting the major social, political and ethical challenges of the day." Though enthusiastically supporting HRD initiatives for their contributions, like the traditionalists, he eschews mandatory adult education.

Another participant did not express a particular preference, and in fact felt that his function was to prepare students to move in either direction. "My role as an adult educator professor is either on the liberal or professional side, that doesn't mean someone else can't be a reformer if they want to, but I don't see that as my role as professor, my role is to try to make sure that my students have the professional competence to practice in whatever institution they find themselves. To prepare professional practitioners to work with adults wherever they find themselves."

And yet another argued "social change is made feasible by cultural change." Meaning that as adult educators, we cannot ignore the needs of individuals in the workplace, consequently social change can and should take place within the institutions that people exist. He proposed that adult educators within the workplace can have an effect on the "... traditional ways that these organizations operate and make them more amenable to team development, to decision-making, distributed decision-making, to working to help adults more effectively function in the

workplace as opposed to simply obeying rules ... memorizing and obeying the rules ... adult educators should learn how to subvert these traditional ways of operating in organizations and make them more amenable to democracy and democratic decision-making."

Most of the respondents concurred that the increased pervasiveness of HRD will only continue to escalate. The avowed traditionalists, consequently, believe that this is the "death knell" for adult education as they define it. One traditionalist stated "much of adult education that is going on now is not seen as adult education by the HRD types." Another also saw the current practice of adult education disappearing. Instead, he predicted that "it will be more of a service area rather than a major. We will teach strategies and procedures with doctors, nurses, accountants, in terms of how to teach their thing within their business."

Others saw Adult Basic Education (ABE) training and workplace literacy needs as increasing opportunities for adult educators. One person, who attended ASTD meetings and acquired their material, believes that they are "ahead of us" in meeting the needs of people in the field who want or need training not education. Another stated that it is "all part of one glorious and honorable field." He recalled his graduate school days and the message of diversity taught by Roby Kidd and Cyril Houle.

One respondent believes that many of our (adult educator) functions are now being done by HRD organizations; consequently, we need to eliminate those tasks from our field and go and do something else. Yet another sees adult education as specializing, conforming to the way society is specializing. As adult education "reinvents" itself, what is surviving is specialists such as university adult educators and industrial adult educators. "It appears that the major institutions have captured adult education. ... The essence of what I am doing now is trying to make some clarity about the attempt to capture learning. It's a very large-scale enterprise right now. The major institutions have discovered that they need employees that are responsive to technological change. They have also discovered that the average person is at their best when they are learning something." Another individual concurred, believing that there will always be an adult education department, but increasingly, other disciplines, such as agriculture, law, and medicine, will take over adult education for themselves.

One participant expressed concerns over this specialization. Educators and learners become focused on some specific area, which they are teaching or learning without looking at the whole of adult education. "... if they're teaching literacy, for instance, how much richer it would be if they could make that class understand they are a group of people along with every other group of people in the world who are learning literacy."

### **Conclusion**

The field of adult education has evolved to its present form and continues to evolve and shape itself as the demands of the culture change. As we move towards an economy that relies heavily on a well-trained workforce, the demand for HRD professionals tends to overshadow the needs of the illiterate and the disenfranchised. Reactions to this evolution from the participants of our study varied from excitement about the possibilities, to frustration over the "abandonment" of the earlier ideals illustrated by the work of Paolo Freire and Ivan Illich. The debate rages on between

those that feel that true adult education should be geared solely and absolutely towards shaping society through the fostering of democracy, versus those who view a more moderate approach that encompasses adult learning in many different venues.

Determining what constitutes the field of adult education, consequently, can be a dilemma for students entering the field. The idealism of earlier generations who sought to use adult education as a means to liberate specific groups of people through initiatives, such as voter registration and education, must be balanced by the needs of today's generation who require lifelong-learning in order to update and improve job skills in a rapidly changing marketplace. We feel that the ideal situation, then, is a synthesis of these two schools of thought, which provides the learners themselves with the freedom to choose what they need at any particular time throughout their life.

Several of our respondents likewise supported this synthesis view. One individual described his job as a professor of adult education students as a facilitator that prepares his students with the abilities to perform their tasks competently regardless of which path they choose. Another summarized this concept when he stated that "learning improves people," therefore, regardless of whether adults are gathered together to advance job skills or take community action, it is the underlying distinctive processes that enable us to call it adult education. The traditionalists continue, however, to lament for those unable to choose or participate in the learning opportunities offered up by the new world order.

In conclusion, the perspectives of the individuals with whom we spoke enriched us, as students in adult education. They taught us to look at the field in a broader scope and illuminated new possibilities to consider as we attempt to identify our own paths in the field. Each individual offered concepts and ideas that were unique and had relevance to the universality of the field. These conversations have taught us that narrowing the field to include only one philosophy over the other would deny others opportunity and choice. We feel that providing adults with the tools to develop their own lifelong learning curriculum is the ultimate purpose of adult education. Only when individuals can choose and develop according to their own needs can they, in the words of one of our respondents, use adult education "to live fully each day."

#### **Participants:**

|                    |                 |              |               |
|--------------------|-----------------|--------------|---------------|
| Robert Carlson     | Gary Eyre       | Huey B. Long | Wilson Thiede |
| Beverly Cassara    | Jack Ferver     | Jack Mezirow | Alan Thomas   |
| Alexander Charters | Alan B. Knox    | John Ohliger | Allen Tough   |
| Phyllis Cunningham | Burton Kreitlow | Don Seaman   | Curtis Ulmer  |

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