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## Place, Time and Doing the Right Thing: The Moral Geographies of Adult Education

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### Recommended Citation

Sork, Thomas J. (2002). "Place, Time and Doing the Right Thing: The Moral Geographies of Adult Education," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2002/papers/61>

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# **Place, Time and Doing the Right Thing: The Moral Geographies of Adult Education**

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**Abstract:** This study explores the relationships between the spatial-temporal locations of adult education faculty during key points in their development and the moral imperatives and ethical frameworks that inform their teaching in graduate programs around the world.

## **Purpose of the Study**

This study was designed to explore the relationships between place, time and the moral frameworks that influence the preparation of adult education practitioners. As used in this study, “place” concerns the social, political, and cultural contexts in which adult educators are situated and “time” concerns the historical periods in which their moral frameworks are initially *formed*, periodically *reformed*, and *performed* in practice. The intersection of place and time produces spatial-temporal *locations* within which it becomes possible to understand how key actors in the preparation of adult educators come to hold views about what it means to “do the right thing” in practice.

The study is based on the assumption that the moral frameworks held by these key actors are reflected in their teaching (and other aspects of the curriculum) and therefore influence the beliefs of their students who then perform their own frameworks in their communities of practice. Understanding something about the dynamics of this process—and what variations in moral frameworks are found in different parts of the English-speaking world—may explain, on the one hand, the rise and fall of university adult education programs, and, on the other, the role these programs play in reinforcing and resisting various moral imperatives.

## **Conceptual Framework**

This study is framed by the concept of moral geography as articulated by Smith (2000), a human geographer with a longstanding interest in the role of ethics in understanding the relationships between people and the built and natural environments they inhabit. Smith rejects a relativist moral stance that claims nothing useful can be said about ethics outside of a particular, situated context, while arguing the position that understanding moral behavior requires knowledge of the locations of the moral actors—including the material conditions under which they are acting—as well as the shared moral commitments that link them to others outside their own geographical context. So, for example, an adult educator committed to social justice might enact that commitment quite differently in the townships of Johannesburg than along the truck routes of Botswana. Although both are situated in Southern Africa, there are fundamental differences in the forms of oppression, material conditions, and possibilities for action in each geographical context. In fact, adult education practice in apartheid South Africa was necessarily quite different than in the early stages of the post-apartheid era. The role of adult education in the early nation-building work of post-colonial Botswana was quite different than in today’s AIDS-ravaged communities along the country’s important transportation corridors. Although a commitment to social justice might be shared by practitioners across these spatial-temporal divides—and provide a way for them to relate to one another—it is the performance of the

commitment to social justice in context that completes our understanding of what social justice means.

Moral geography is a useful conceptual tool for understanding the formation, reformation and performance of moral frameworks that influence the work of adult educators because it argues the value of having both a widely-shared set of moral commitments that provides a kind of occupational “glue” that creates solidarity within a disparate field and an appreciation of context-sensitive moral knowledge drawn from the local and particular.

### **Research Design**

This study is based on 116 face-to-face and telephone interviews conducted between October, 2000 and September, 2001 with faculty who teach in adult education postgraduate and graduate programs in 37 universities located in eight countries—Australia, Botswana, Canada, England, New Zealand, Scotland, South Africa, and the United States. These tape-recorded, semi-structured interviews lasted about one hour and covered a range of issues related to the moral imperatives and ethical frameworks embedded in the curriculum in which each participant taught. All of the programs in which participants taught were designed to either prepare the inexperienced to become novice adult educators or to help experienced adult educators become more thoughtful, reflective and effective practitioners or researchers. Most were campus-based programs but several were web-based or used the web as an adjunct to on-campus work. In all countries except Botswana, interviews were conducted in more than one university. Three universities each were included in Scotland, New Zealand and South Africa, four in Australia, five in England, seven in Canada and 11 in the United States.

Sections of the interviews germane to this study were analyzed for content that revealed participants’ beliefs about aspects of their personal histories that substantially influenced the development of their moral/ethical frameworks and how these frameworks are reflected in the curriculum. Of particular interest in this study are the *locations* in which they lived, studied and worked and the relationship between these locations and their moral commitments.

### **Findings**

Four findings from this study are reported and briefly discussed in this limited space:

1. Temporal proximity rather than spatial proximity better explains the degree to which moral frameworks have common elements. The mean age of participants in this study was 50.4 years which means that many of them are part of the “baby boom” generation educated in the 1960s and 1970s. Many referred to their “liberal” political leanings. There seems to be a dominant generation of adult education faculty whose moral frameworks were substantially formed during roughly the same historical period when student activism of many kinds was endemic to universities. It did not seem to matter much where these folks were located during this period; they all were substantially influenced by the student and anti-war movements of the 1960s and early 1970s.

Those who were considerably younger than the mean—even when they expressed moral commitments similar to the “baby boom” participants—formed their beliefs in very different circumstances. It was more likely that these participants attributed their beliefs to influential parents or an experience traveling or teaching “overseas” than to any event or circumstance common to their generation. But these participants were in the minority. A closer analysis would be required to say this with greater confidence, but there appears to be a major change on the near horizon in adult education. If we assume that most professors of adult education

will retire somewhere near their 65<sup>th</sup> birthday—plus or minus 5 years—then there will be a dramatic “changing of the guard” in adult education graduate programs worldwide. If these findings are evidence of the power of a shared generational experience in the formation of common beliefs that promote a sort of moral solidarity within the adult education professorate, then what will happen when those who have this experience retire en masse? On the one hand, it may mean that adult education as represented in university curricula will be redefined/reinvented so it is more consistent with the values and perspectives of younger generations. But it could also be the end of the university study of adult education if universities decide to seize the opportunity to eliminate programs that might not be viewed as central to the work of the college or faculty of education. The marginal role of adult education in many universities makes it vulnerable to changing priorities in higher education so there may be a major challenge ahead that will give new meaning to “succession planning!” Has there been a shared generational experience among the younger professorate that will provide a similar “occupational glue” to sustain the field of study in universities or will the field fragment/disintegrate? The limited number of interviews conducted with younger professors did not provide any evidence of such an experience, so the question remains open for now.

2. There is a strong commitment to social justice—broadly defined—found in a majority of the programs included in this study, but there is wide variation in how this is enacted in the curriculum. Except for general readings like the works of Freire, this most often took the form of cases or issues with local resonance that became the subject of discussion in courses. This was especially true in locations where there was little endemic literature and where there was resistance to using materials from other countries.

It was surprising that there was not a more common “foundational literature” used in graduate programs... a literature that reflected the values and moral frameworks described by participants. Although there has been a quantum increase in the amount of literature produced in the northern hemisphere during the last 30 years, much of this is viewed as irrelevant or “colonizing” in the South. Consequently, with very few exceptions, a commitment to social justice is enacted in curricula in the time-honored forms of critical group discussion and analysis of locally-relevant cases. The dearth of locally relevant literature was felt most acutely in southern Africa (South Africa and Botswana) and New Zealand, yet it may be in these locations that an oral-relational tradition in education “compensates” for what those from the North might consider a limiting factor.

The commitment to social justice—in some form or another and not necessarily using that term—was striking. The origins of the commitment are complex and the ways the commitment is reflected in the curriculum are diverse, but it is clearly the glue that binds many professors together morally and intellectually.

3. There is tension—sometimes productive and sometimes not—within many programs between commitments to “social purpose” forms of adult education and “economic-instrumental” forms. Sometimes this tension was between faculty and sometimes between students. In locations where adult education was expected to contribute directly to economic efficiency—and especially where this was mandated externally—there were various forms of resistance ranging from taking a “critical approach” to human resource development to intellectual hostility between different ideological camps.

There has been evidence of this tension for many years. In meetings of the Commission of Professors of Adult Education (US) held nearly 20 years ago there were lively debates about whether a human resource development orientation was consistent with or antithetical to adult education. And the formation of the Academy of Human Resource Development in the US reflects a lack of affinity between HRD specialists and professors of adult education. It is clear in this study that HRD has made inroads in many adult education programs. In fact, some programs have reoriented their curriculum so it is more attractive to those in training because these programs see trainers/HRD specialists as an important “market.” It must also be said that not all programs with an HRD focus were “instrumental” in outlook. In fact, a few seemed to be strongly “critical” in the best sense of that word. Faculty in some programs described important synergies between the adult education and HRD perspectives. Others reported an intellectual rift between those with a social purpose orientation and those with an HRD orientation. There was some resentment expressed as well in programs where the HRD focus was gaining strength while adult education was declining. This tension raises challenging questions...especially in the current context where the discourses of globalization, competitiveness, and economic efficiency dominate.

4. Faculty who lived through major social-economic disjunctures (e.g., the fall of apartheid in South Africa (regarded as a good thing); Thatcherism in England (generally regarded as a bad thing)) whose moral frameworks were well-established before these changes occurred often found the new circumstances disappointing, but for different reasons. For example, adult education programs in South Africa were active players in the anti-apartheid movement and held great hopes for the post-apartheid future of adult education. Because the political location of these programs was clear and the project to dismantle apartheid provided focus to the work, faculty and students shared strongly-held values that were enacted in their practice. Since the fall of apartheid there has been disappointment with the low priority given to adult education as the country struggles to redress structural inequalities in basic services like health care and housing. The adult education project has had to shift from its anti-apartheid focus and reinvent itself to lay claim to resources and gain the attention of policy makers. There is some unease with the reinvented project because to some of those interviewed, it is based on an uncritical acceptance of human capital theory, a conservative view of globalization and its implications for South Africa, and a constrained role for adult education—a role that primarily serves the dominant players in the economy.

In England, some of those interviewed spoke nostalgically about their work in the WEA (Workers' Education Association) and how this experience early in their careers substantially influenced their values and moral commitments. Many of those without direct involvement in the WEA seemed to share the same commitment to a liberal, critical education designed to open opportunities and resist oppression. Living through the Thatcher era was disheartening to many because it was seen to halt the social justice project to which so many adult educators were committed. Living with the post-Thatcher “new left” was not much better since they are continuing the conservative project while addressing some of its more politically-sensitive consequences. There is presently great attention being paid to “widening access” to postsecondary education. Funding for new programs and for research projects is closely linked to economic objectives because of the presumed relationship between access to postsecondary education and needs of the labor market. Here, as in South Africa, the social justice project that initially attracted many to the field has been reinvented to reflect the dominant discourse related to economic imperatives and globalization. The core moral

commitments to social justice forms of adult education persist, but there is some concern with how the discourse—and the funding priorities that flow from it—limits the possibilities for action and constrains participation.

### **Discussion**

The concern of this paper is the relationship between the spatial-temporal locations of professors when their beliefs formed about what it means to “do the right thing” in adult education and what gets represented in the curriculum of graduate programs. This study did not analyze curricula directly, but instead depended on the responses/stories of those interviewed for insights into this relationship. What was learned was that of those interviewed, many have in common the experience of being in university during the social tumult of the 1960s and early 1970s. There were many different pathways taken into the field of adult education, but exposure to the abuses of power and oppression that galvanized students had lasting effects on their views about education and social justice. Those who had similar beliefs but were from different generations were influenced by parents, world travel or other experiences that exposed them to social inequality, racism, sexism and other forms of oppression.

Of course, not everyone in the study shared these beliefs and moral commitments. There are other important purposes of adult education to which professors are committed and these other purposes are arguably as noble. However, the social purpose aims of adult education seem to supply the occupational glue that holds the field together internationally. How this aim is represented and enacted in the curriculum—and in practice—varies dramatically from one part of the world to another, but the moral commitment is pervasive. The tensions that exist between those committed to social justice aims and those committed to other aims are strong in many programs and this represents a danger to the viability of graduate programs.

### **Conclusions**

This study demonstrates the utility of “moral geography” as a tool for understanding how moral frameworks are *formed*, *reformed* and *performed* by those who teach in adult education programs. Because these frameworks are performed on the curriculum in largely tacit ways, it is important to understand their origins and how they may influence the preparation of adult educators to work in geographically diverse contexts. The study also reveals the fragile character of adult education as a field of university study. Although there are powerful values that bind the field together at present, these values may be the products of a unique period in world history. Whether the university study of adult education can withstand the predictable forces that may challenge its place in the academy remains to be seen. This study has identified some of the factors that make this a dangerous period in our history and may point to ways of reinventing the study of adult education so it continues to occupy an important niche in the educational landscape worldwide.

### **References**

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