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Scott McLean

Bethany Beale

Silvana Romano  
*University of Calgary*

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## University continuing education and social change: Theoretical and methodological points of departure

Scott McLean, Bethany Beale, and Silvana Romano  
University of Calgary

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the relationship between university continuing education and social change. It presents an example of how historical-comparative methods and sociological theory are essential for understanding this relationship.

University continuing education (UCE) is a term that describes various forms of practice through which universities provide educational services to those not enrolled in traditional on-campus study. Most universities in North America have some form of UCE unit, responsible for organizing initiatives such as non-credit outreach and extension programs, certificate programs, distance education, and degree-credit classes in the evening or during spring and summer terms.

Existing literature contains two basic schools of thought with regard to the relationship between UCE and social change. One view posits UCE as a means through which individuals may adapt to the changing world. From this point of view, UCE is seen as an integral means through which individuals and nations may adapt to globalization, new information and communications technologies, the emergence of knowledge-based economies, and associated social and cultural changes. Another view contends that UCE has the potential to proactively shape society. From this point of view, UCE has the potential to be a vibrant and democratic means through which activists and citizens work to create a better world.

The actual relationship between UCE and social change can only be determined through rigorous empirical research and theory development. The purpose of our roundtable session at AERC 2006 is to engage participants in a discussion of the theoretical and methodological foundations of a rigorous and critical approach to understanding UCE and social change. How could historical-comparative methods enable researchers to assess the many claims that have been made about the relationship between UCE and social change? Is the image of individual human beings adapting to or resisting social structures an adequate theoretical point of departure for understanding social change?

As a point of departure for discussion, we offer the following illustration of the importance of historical-comparative methods and sociological theory, to the understanding of UCE in Western Canada (this research has been funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada). By the early 1900s, the Canadian provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia had each established a publicly-funded university. In subsequent decades, each provincial university established a unit responsible for a range of educational programs and services for adults not enrolled in traditional on-campus study. UCE units were very significant to the history of adult education in Western Canada during the past century. Despite this substantive importance, there has been only modest scholarly debate about the reasons for the emergence and evolution of these units. The institutions themselves have historically made three basic claims regarding the purposes of their extension or continuing education units: to extend the resources of the university for the benefit of citizens, to foster

social and economic progress, and to meet the needs of individuals and communities. Each of these claims was predominant at a different point in time, with extending resources being most popular from the 1910s to the 1930s, fostering progress becoming common from the 1940s to the 1960s, and meeting needs dominating the last three decades of the century.

On the basis of comparative-historical research, we argue that university-based adult education emerged and evolved in Western Canada due to processes of state formation in which provincial and federal governments have engaged in efforts to build and shape economies and cultures in the region. Shifting claims regarding the purpose of UCE in Western Canada reflect the shifting challenges of state formation in the region. In the early part of the 1900s, the regional economy was dominated by mercantile production, in which independent producers (primarily farmers) sold commodities to the marketplace. In the middle decades of the century, there was a profound shift in the regional economy, and wage labor replaced commodity production as the primary means of earning a living. By the 1970s, capitalism had matured in the region, and wage labor had become taken for granted as the source of most people's subsistence.

Viewed in the context of this political-economic transformation, the claims made by universities about the purposes of extension and continuing education can be understood more completely. Claims about extending resources made sense when the regional economy depended on supporting geographically dispersed commodity producers, and when provincial institutions depended on the extraction of tax revenues from such producers. Claims about fostering progress made sense when the regional economy was being transformed through processes that separated commodity producers from their means of production, and integrated them into wage labor relationships. Claims about meeting needs have made sense ever since economic life in the region became firmly based in wage labor, and such laborers demonstrably needed education and training in order to obtain good jobs.

The importance of historical-comparative methods and sociological theory in this illustration can be summarized as follows. Taking the claims of universities at face value, one would assume that over the course of the 1900s, the purpose of UCE in Western Canada gradually shifted from extending resources, to fostering progress, and then to meeting needs. Subjecting those claims to historical and sociological analysis, we argue that UCE has consistently supported the project of state formation in Western Canada. While the political-economic and ideological terms of this project changed considerably during the 1900s, the basic role of UCE has remained consistent: to develop human subjects capable of productive roles in the evolving economy of the region.