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Introducing Legal Courses Into Adult Education Graduate Curricula

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Abstract: This paper discusses research concerning the argument for the introduction of legal training into adult education graduate curricula.

Legal issues permeate the field of adult education in the United States. Virtually every area of adult education has been, and is currently, touched by the law in some way. More knowledge in various areas of law would undoubtedly benefit field practitioners and adult learners in manifold situations. Unfortunately, legal training has not made its way from use in the general field to inclusion in graduate adult education programs. This paper discusses ongoing research that supports the argument for including legal training in graduate adult education programs in the United States.

Defined in the broadest of terms, law and adult education have substantial commonalities and nexuses that demonstrate need and potential for more abundant and symbiotic connections. Commonalities between the two entities include that both law and adult education have been essential parts of the United States since before the Country's official inception. Each also currently permeates society and continues to be used for myriad purposes from maintaining the status quo to promoting social change. Moreover, both entities are imperfect and subject to causing certain inequities. For instance, parts of both entities are guilty of promoting and perpetuating the dominant culture at the expense of other culture and class groups. Law effects this undesirable result by promoting certain classes of individuals to lawmaking positions who then enact or affect the enacting of laws that promote, or at least coincide with, their personal agendas, preferences, and lifestyles. Adult education effects these results by much the same means. More formal kinds of adult education cater to the values of the dominant culture and reward those who adhere to them, while excluding disadvantaged groups through the perpetuation of physical and practical barriers as well as social conditioning and the lack of relevant (from the perspective of the disadvantaged) program subject matter.

The similarities between law and adult education discussed above transform into more of a kinship when combined with other pertinent connections. One of these connections is that legal education has always been, and continues to be, a part of adult education in the United States. Formal and informal adult education methods were used to advance political, civic, and practical legal education which was instrumental in effecting early political and civic stability, emancipation and the Bill of Rights, women's suffrage, Americanization, the labor movement, and the civil rights movement. Adult education involving civic and democratic awareness and action, in which law is inherent, has been promoted and actuated by such notable adult educators as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Jane Adams, Susan B. Anthony, Eduard Lindeman, John Dewey, and Myles Horton to name only a few; and world renowned adult educator Paulo Freire, who saw adult education as a political endeavor (in company with such educators as Phyllis Cunningham, Myles Horton, and Jack Mezirow), was trained as a lawyer prior to beginning his remarkable adult education activities. Today "influencing public policy to effect social and economic justice and to engage full citizenship involvement" may be considered "a central task of adult education" (Lander, 2004, p. 83), and adult education faculty,

staff and administrators in myriad organizations and positions are affected by and/or must deal with laws concerning such issues as aging, employment, health care reform, higher education, immigration, disabilities, affirmative action, sexual harassment, welfare reform and other social services. Unfortunately, recent decades have seen a wane in adult civic, political and legal education even as public adult knowledge on these subjects continues to decline.

Although the legal system in this country continues to grow and now affects virtually every aspect of life, common knowledge of the subject has not kept up with this expansion and permeation. Causes of this decreasing legal knowledge base include an apathetic citizenry and receding involvement of adult educators due to a lack of resources and the emergence of problems in other areas. Today, most basic legal education is handled by federally funded legal aid programs, which are meeting only a fraction of the need. At most, twenty percent of the poor are receiving needed legal education or services, while middle class people may be in a worse situation because they do not qualify for free services. Moreover, the majority of available legal education is conducted by lawyers who are not trained as adult educators. Thus, these efforts are not optimally productive or effective.

A stronger connection between law and adult education would produce several benefits. Of course the general public would benefit from more legal education, which means it would benefit from adult educators revitalizing civic education and taking on a greater role in broader adult legal education by learning and then teaching the subject matter.

Looking deeper, adult educators, lawyers and judges would also benefit from adult educators obtaining knowledge of law. Adult educators in every facet of the field could undoubtedly benefit from pertinent legal knowledge. As they, in their various occupations, deal with the disparate legal issues mentioned earlier, more extensive knowledge about pertinent laws and navigating pertinent legal (including administrative) systems would make them more confident and effective in their work, and allow them to gain and effectively utilize power within the political system, lobbying for lawmaking in their interests. Adult educators with a knowledge of the legal field could assist and train lawyers to be more effective, not only in their teaching endeavors, but in dealing with their clients in a more effective and satisfying way. Finally, judges across the country now need assistance in keeping up with changing laws and their social ramifications. Adult educators with a knowledge of law could not only perform exceedingly well in this capacity and add to the breadth of opportunity in the field, but they also could help judges affect social and legal justice in a symbiotic relationship.

The current need for and potential benefits of adult legal education support the argument that legal education courses should be offered within graduate programs in adult education where adult educators who enter the field of practice are trained. Proposed further research in support of such an argument includes historical and current case studies (of the Highlander Research and Education Center and a state judicial education department respectively) to identify what legal adult education has, and does, comprise, as well as continued review of field literature to discover the cause of the apparent disconnect between the fields.

References

Lander, D. (2004). The legacy of the social gospel in adult education. *The Journal of Adult theological Education*, 1(1), 79-90.