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## Adult Education and a Culture of Peace

Bruce Spencer

*Athabasca University, Canada*

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# Adult Education and a Culture of Peace

Bruce Spencer  
Athabasca University, Canada

**Abstract:** This roundtable explores Bud Hall's argument that: "... as adult educators, we have lots to offer in the current culture of fear, negativity and violence."

Bud, who has a long standing commitment to peace activism and was animated by the Israeli attack on Lebanon, sent out emails on the CASAE list in the summer of 2006 under the heading *Adult Education and a Culture of Peace*: he posed a number of questions "I wonder how we can better support the work of locally based adult educators in the Occupied Territories, in Lebanon, in Israel who are reaching out with alternative messages? In Canada, can work initiated by Howard Davidson in Winnipeg get more visibility and support? Could we invite several adult educators from the region to the next CASAE meeting? Can we organize study circles to better inform ourselves and our friends, students about what is going on?"

In thinking about these questions I could not help but wonder if there really is a connection between "adult education" and "peace" today: or are many of today's adult educators so busy with everyday tasks they are not interested in the big issues of the day: or is it perhaps that concerns about "world peace" seem too remote? With one question leading to another, the questions of who are adult educators today and is adult education a distinctive field that can "make a contribution" surfaces.

The purpose of this roundtable discussion is to explore some of these connected issues and hopefully point to a role that adult education scholars can play in support of peace activism.

## Adult Education Today

When we situate adult education (in Canada and elsewhere) we look for its non-formal non-vocational roots in community, women's, workers', rural, and citizenship education initiatives. But if we have to describe adult education today we are forced to acknowledge that many of our students and practitioners who we may describe as "adult educators" work as "trainers," or in ESL, or as HRD consultants; in contrast those working in "community" or "labour" or even "personal interest and leisure" environments are few and far between.

We also have to acknowledge that those of us who proclaim adult education scholarship are not always actively engaged in adult education practices outside of the academy (or if we are it's a relatively minor part of our lives). I want to make it clear that I include myself in this category of lapsed practitioners. I am actively engaged in my own institution but relatively passive outside of it.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that while adult education (as opposed to education for adults) always was a marginal activity it is even more marginal and less present today than in any time in the recent past; and certainly social purpose adult education -- "education for life" rather than "for a livelihood" -- is in decline. We may well have a majority of adult education students who are content with the status quo, with "education for economy" and are in turn "adapting and accommodating" their own students/clients to the status quo. How can we challenge them and in turn set up a chain reaction of questioning that will reach public consciousness? The roundtable will examine arguments for adult education peace activism in a

number of settings: our educational institutions, local community, and nationally and internationally.

### *In Our Educational Institutions*

If we think “globally and act locally” on issues of peace we may want to explore the limits and possibilities of our own institutions, academic institutions could be described as a “quasi-democracies” we certainly have more power to influence policy than in the majority of strictly hierarchical workplaces. We can press through academic unions and representative bodies and boards for ethical investment policies for institutional and pension funds that exclude corporations within the “industrial/military complex.” We can arrange speakers, seminars and conferences that focus on peace issues. We can explore how to include peace issues in our courses and programs. There are a number of possibilities that may include reaching out to the community in “town and gown” initiatives.

Finding space for an informed discussion about foreign policy in most of our much more narrowly focused courses is never easy but if we do not inform ourselves and grasp opportunities it will not happen (this is not to deny that students may themselves make these initiatives).

### *In the Local Community*

Given our skills as researchers, writers and communicators we can also initiate or respond to “letters to the editor” in local or national press or other media and on-line discussion groups. I don’t know if we can claim that adult educators are better equipped than most to do this work but perhaps our communication style is generally more direct than some of our more pure disciplinary-focused colleagues. Writing letters to the paper or sending comment to radio and TV programs is within our range: engaging in informed public debate is “public adult education” as are demonstrations, vigils and the like. Of course editing by newspapers will cut letters but my experience is enough of it can survive to make the key points desired.

### *Nationally and Internationally*

Bud also asked for international initiatives: at the outbreak of the Iraq war CASAE did something I do not remember them doing previously and that was write an open letter to the Canadian Prime Minister arguing the case for peace – I think it still stands up as a model of its kind. The letter began with an appeal to the historical roots of Canadian involvement in world bodies committed to peaceful resolution and then reviewed in some detail the arguments against the war. It was designed to be informative and educational and while presented as an argument against invasion it had enough clarity that any reader could assess the arguments for themselves.

### *Discussion Questions*

As argued above some write to newspapers and media to express alternative peaceful perspectives and others give public lectures (Mike Welton in the Fall of 2006 gave a talk on *The problem of Israel in the modern world*). It takes guts to put your opinion out there in opposition to dominant ideology. How can we better inform ourselves? Does it make sense to try to operate internationally if we are having no effect locally? What else can be done?