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Recommended Citation

Schied, Fred M.; Mulenga, Derek; and Baptiste, Ian (2005). "Lifelong Learning in a Global Context: Towards a Reconceptualization of Adult Education," *Adult Education Research Conference*.

<https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2005/papers/31>

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Lifelong Learning in a Global Context: Towards a Reconceptualization of Adult Education

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Abstract: *The paper argues that a reconceptualization of adult education around lifelong learning and globalization requires a rethinking of curricular and research issues. The paper highlights curricular issues involved in creating in such a reconceptualization. It does this by juxtapositioning the objectives and goals of this "new" focus with the CPAE's Standards for Graduate Programs. Objectives and goals are suggested that revolve around integrated notions of learning that account for the impact of globalization on learning as inseparable from political and social processes.*

Introduction

If one looks at development within the discipline of adult education internationally, there has been a marked shift away from an adult continuing education perspective to a lifelong learning focus. By an adult continuing education perspective we mean a conceptualization, reflected in the Commission of Professors of Adult Educations (CPAE) Standards for Graduate Programs, which implicitly locates the key elements of the field within individual and organizational contexts.

Lifelong learning is not a new concept, but beginning in the early 1990s the notion of lifelong learning has become the defining framework for adult education in much of the world. The meaning of lifelong learning and its centrality to economic development within the nexus of globalization has radically reshaped and replaced older notions of adult continuing education. For example, the European Union and South Korea have created Ministries of Lifelong Learning and subsumed much of educational policy under this new conception. Within Africa, especially in the Republic of South Africa, this shift is also evident in programmatic and academic changes towards a lifelong learning focus. Within North America (especially the United States), this shift has been slower compared to the developments in the rest of the world. Thus the overarching purpose of this paper is three fold: 1) to locate lifelong learning within the nexus of globalization; 2) to argue that the shift to a lifelong learning focus is crucial to the continued relevance of adult education; 3) to suggest reasons why American adult education has been slow to adapt to this change (Halliday 2003;Field, 2000; Brown, P., 1999).

Globalization and lifelong learning

As we noted above, globalization and lifelong learning have become defining features of the new millennium and of adult education. However, there are competing visions of globalization. For instance, one vision holds that globalization has led to a rapid reorganization of economic production systems and labor markets such that local and regional trade arrangements are no longer viable. Simultaneously, that vision asserts, technological revolutions in computers, telecommunications and transportation have affected the nature of life, work, and learning at the community, regional, and global levels. In this view, globalization is widespread and permanent, and shortages of high-level skills and inadequate education and training systems put families, communities, institutions, and the economic competitiveness of nations at risk. In every part of the world, governments are exhorting their citizens to train and educate themselves for competition in the global economy. At the same time significant numbers of people have argued that alternatives to this view of globalization need to be developed. This view holds that it is crucial to demystify the discourse around globalization and lifelong learning and focus on issues of social justice and equity (Spring, 2004; Marginson, 1999; Hoogvelt, 1997).

Lifelong learning can be examined from three viewpoints. First, given the constancy of change and flexibility, the ability to acquire new skills, ideas and attitudes, while not itself enough to drive change, is a precondition for economic transformation. This is reflected in the explosion of informal, non-formal and self-directed learning processes that seek to transform individuals' lives and identities. However, social and cultural forces are also increasingly important in determining the ways in which people acquire new skills and capacities. This means that no longer can education be viewed as a linear, formal process institutionally separated from other aspects of life.

Second, lifelong learning needs to be examined at the level of policy. Policy needs to be understood as a political process at a system level as well as at the level of institutions and sub-systems. In conjunction with policy, lifelong learning needs to be understood as patterns of behavior that are necessary to a knowledge economy. As noted by many social scientists, lifelong learning is the process by which individuals and institutions are required to reflect on what they know in order to make their choices about who they are and how they behave. Third, as well as empowering people, lifelong learning can also serve as a mechanism for exclusion and control. The move to a knowledge-based economy means that those who have the lowest level of skills and the weakest capacity for constant updating are less likely to find sustainable employment. At the same time, social support systems are being weakened or made conditional. One result of this is a somewhat authoritarian discourse of education in which those who are unable to fully participate in the knowledge economy do not deserve support from society. Lifelong learning both expresses and reinforces these trends and to some extent legitimizes them.

Regardless of ideological or political persuasion regarding globalization and lifelong learning, there is consensus that it is vital that citizens learn to function in this new and dynamic world. As the boundaries between work, community, and family become ever more blurred and ever more lived out in a global context. The central focus of inquiry and practice, we argue, must shift to analysis of lifelong learning as a

phenomenon interconnected with, and indeed inseparable from, globalization in all its multiple manifestations.

Role of adult education in globalization.

What should be the role of adult education? Broadly speaking, there are three possible responses –do nothing, engage and accept globalization or resist and / or build alternatives. We discuss some suggestions and tasks for adult educators below.

First, adult educators must challenge the discourse of accepting globalization as an inevitable product of “development.” The phenomenon of globalization as packaging by the so-called “Washington Consensus” is debatable. This implies resisting and confronting the totalizing gaze of the ideology of globalization as an inevitable force of nature because it negates the centrality of human agency.

Second, adult educators must become more actively involved in generating awareness as well as articulating counter-critique of not only globalization is but its relationship/impact on education/lifelong learning. It means getting involved in creating alternatives such as accessible foray for discussion and exchange of information, strategies aimed at building capacities for local groups to engage and confront globalization and its effects and supporting initiatives, networks and campaigns at the local, national and international level that aim at building solidarity especially among workers, women. Adult educators must actively oppose racism, sexism and all forms of discrimination. Third, adult educators must do more than just teaching about globalization or presenting academic papers about globalization and human rights. Adult educators need to develop new conceptual tools which contextualize the political economy of adult education and which recognizes that history, class, power and the state are all features that need to be taken into account in coming to grips with changes in the education, the economy and society (Brown, 1999). One way of developing new conceptual tools is to become more adventurous about crossing the narrow disciplinary 'borders' and seeking and appropriating new perspectives to track, inform and expand our analysis of processes of change inherent to capitalism and its transformations and expressions. The question remains of how does one integrate these notions into a coherent curriculum?

Curricular issues in globalization and lifelong learning

The Commission of Professors of Adult Education (CPAE) Standards for Graduate Programs in Adult Education suggests that programs at the doctoral level should include advanced study of adult learning, in-depth analysis of social, political, and economic forces that the foundations of the field; the study of leadership; and the study of issues that impinge on policy formations, and advanced study of methods of inquiry (Commission of Professors of Adult Education [CPAE], n.d., p. 2).

In attempting to move away from what we argue is the CPAE’s overly generalized yet at the same time individualistic and narrow perspective, we have established the following curricular objectives:

- Examine the impact of globalization on the educational opportunities and challenges for adults
- Study how political and social processes shape access, provision, and structure

- Learn how identity, culture, and language diversity affect access, provision, and structure of adult education
- Examine how adult and family literacy is framed by issues of global economic competitiveness
- Learn how distance education and other applications of technology are shaping the education of adults
- Examine how learning in work and communities is affected by processes of globalization
- Provide students with the methodological understandings and skills to conduct high quality research in adult education

In order to meet these objectives, the curriculum is organized as follows: 1) core courses addressing the philosophical, research and knowledge base of Globalization and Lifelong Learning; 2) four adult education emphasis areas (from which the student chooses one Distance Education, Literacy for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Populations, Comparative Lifelong Learning, and Learning in Work and Society; 3) electives in adult education that complement the emphasis area; 4) supporting area from outside adult education to provide greater background to the emphasis area; 5) the research methods core through which students develop competency in quantitative and qualitative methods; and 6) the dissertation. Student will be expected to synthesize the knowledge base, theory, research and practice of adult education and related fields.

Instead of a course dealing with the history or foundations of adult education, the introductory course deals with a critical examination of globalization discourses and their relationships, implications, and impact on lifelong learning processes and contexts. Secondly, the core emphasis examines the relationship between issues of language, literacy, identity and culture for adult learners in an increasingly global context. Finally, as in most programs, our core addresses adult learning, although we understand adult learning to be socially and historically constructed, not just a psychological or cognitive process.

The four emphasis areas are interrelated, yet provide a focus that moves away from US –centric views and attempts to examine learning from a global perspective. For example, the Learning in Work and Society area examines work (in both its paid and unpaid forms) within the context of communities and community research, while the Literacy for Cultural and Linguistically Diverse Populations focuses issues of identity and culture in an increasingly global context.

From a research perspective, this means that both research topics and methods of research need to change. Addressing issues of, say, race, gender, class or ethnicity need to be examined within a global context. Moreover, methods of research can no longer be understood within a paradigm where qualitative and quantitative research are seen as oppositional forms of inquiry. The emphasis, therefore, is on understanding the underlying assumptions of all forms of research. At the same time research opportunities need to be provided that give students (especially American students) the opportunity to experience and conduct research in settings outside the United States. While this is still in its infancy, the program's Committee for Community Directed Research and Education has provide opportunities for graduate students to be involved for an extended time, with communities groups in the United States and the Caribbean.

Conclusion and Implications

The paper argues that a reconceptualization of adult education around lifelong learning requires a rethinking of curricular and research issues within the field. From a curricular standpoint, the paper highlighted the types of courses required in the “new” field of Lifelong Learning in a Global Context. It did this by juxtaposition the objectives, and goals of this “new” field with the CPAE’s Standards for Graduate Programs. Specifically, objectives and goals are suggested that revolve around integrated notions of learning that account for the impact of globalization on learning as inseparable from political and social processes, discusses how identity, culture, and language diversity affect access, provision, and structure of nonformal, informal and formal learning.

Secondly, the paper argued for a research agenda that incorporates social and cultural forces, not as a backdrop or as an influence, but into the very heart of the learning process. Moving beyond constructivist approaches to learning, the paper suggested theoretical and methodological perspectives on lifelong learning in other parts of world could provide insights that might be adapted to the American context.

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