Shift of Adult Education Research

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the main features of adult education research and research methods from the 1950s to the early 2000s and their implications for adult education research in the future.

The Purpose of the Study

Knowing how adult education research shifted its focus in different periods of time and evolved into its current territory will help us understand the direction of the field of adult education research and remind us of the areas that are ignored in the field. Therefore, this paper aims to analyze the main features of adult education research from the 1950s to the 2000s. Two questions will be used to guide the analysis: (a) what are the main features of adult education research; and (b) what are the main features of adult education research methods?

There are an enormous amount of publications in the field of adult education. I examined the topics relevant to adult education research in a variety of adult education publications, such as Yearbook of Adult and Continuing Education, Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education, Handbook of Adult Education, the journal of Adult Education, etc. The themes generalized from the literature on adult education research will be reported below to answer the aforementioned two research questions.

1950s

In the 1950s, the main purpose of adult education was to train citizens to become democratic and civilized. The proceedings and the research review reports from 1955 to 1959 indicate that adult education research in the 1950s was greatly supported by the adult education organization/institutions, some adult education associations, and certain financial support from the federal government, industry and associations, etc. Adult education research during this period borrowed ideas and theories from other fields. Researchers also described and reflected experience in the practice and absorbed the scientific research methods and research achievements from the university.

The body of adult education knowledge in the 1950s came mainly from reflecting the experience in practice. After analyzing the studies from 1955 to 1959, Kaplan (1959) pointed out that plenty of studies dealt with program, clientele, methods and process, college and university, and rural adult education, while only a paucity of studies dealt with the philosophy, values and objectives of adult education. Adult education research during this period was more concerned with practical issues and problems, and the research benefited from reflecting the experience in

practice. By the late 1950s, more and more research studies focused on applied work instead of basic research.

Due to a scarcity of both highly trained professional adult educators and a lack of systematic theories on adult education, adult education research in the 1950s substantially borrowed ideas and theories from other fields. During this period, nearly every discipline in the social sciences contributed to the expanding horizons of knowledge about the education of adults (Verner, 1956). Kaplan (1958) stated that the most significant research studies in adult education have been produced by social scientists in other disciplines; the basic research was conducted by psychologists and sociologists; its tools were derived from psychology and sociology; and its philosophical framework was from social philosophy, political science, and history. Growth of professional training in universities contributed to adult education research by emphasizing the application of scientific research methods to problems in adult education. The increasing number of doctoral dissertations contributed to the growing recognition of adult education as an area for study (Verner, 1956).

Adult education research in the 1950s was mainly descriptive and quantitative based. Brunner, Wilder, Kirchner and Newberry (1959) stated that "…Works [in 1950s] … are descriptive or narrative accounts of specific projects, programs or agencies" (p.6). The increased use of scientific methods in adult education research is also distinct during this period. Browsing the journal of Adult Education from 1950 to 1951, I noticed that most of the studies used methods such as test, survey, scales, experimental. Verner (1956) said that "The most notable trend is the increase in empirical research…. In recent years there has been an increase in the application of scientific methods to the study of adults as students and to adult education as a distinctive subject" (p. 226). The methods used in the research include those such as test, survey, experimental methods, interview, observation, case study, historical methods, etc. The quantitative research method dominated in adult education research, especially in the mid and late 1950s. Qualitative research methods such as interview, observation, case study, historical, etc. were also largely used in the mid and late 1950s.

1960s

With support from the university, associations, the federal government and other institutions, adult education research expanded rapidly in its mission, scope, and in the development of graduate programs (Kreitlow, 1970). Adult education research in the 1960s still borrowed some theories from other fields and generalized experience from practice (Jensen, 1964). Adult Education developed its body of knowledge through the following channels: "(1) Experiences gained from coping with problems of practice lead to the formulation of principles or generations which provide guides for future practice…(2) Knowledge which has been developed by other disciplines is borrowed and reformulated for use in adult education" (Jensen, 1964, p.105). Jensen (1964) noticed that,

though the adult educator [in the 1960s] does indirectly test a theoretical system, his main purpose is to deal with the problems that continuously arise, and to gain more effective control of them...He first thinks of a system of ideas in terms of its usefulness for dealing with problems of practice and only secondly of its empirical and logical validity. (p.107)

With the boom of training-related activities in the 1960s (see Decrow, 1967), various new training models appeared, such as laboratory training, T-group training, human relations training, and cross-cultural training. Adult education research focused more on practical and applied topics such as training, and less on the rising social problems (London, 1970). There was little research about the topics of social problems (Decrow, 1967). The role of adult education in America "developed somewhat chaotically in response to a great variety of special interests and needs rather than systematically in response to some overall plan and purpose" (Schroeder, 1970, p.33). Adult education "concerned with non-controversial topics and vocational training at the expense of learning for better citizenship" (London, 1970, p.13).

In the 1960s, though both qualitative and quantitative research methods were used in the research, the majority of research methods used in adult education research were quantitative research methods such as experimental, test, scale, and questionnaires.

1970s

In the 1970s, multiple forces pushed adult education development, such as support from the federal government, universities and some professional organizations (such as the Commission of Professors), information centers (such as clearinghouses), various conferences, journals. These changes as well as the increasing number of programs called for more sophisticated research. Some researchers realized that adult education should have its own theoretical foundations (Alford, 1978; Knox, 1975; Long, Hiemstra & Associates,1980).

In the 1970s, researchers debated about whether adult education should focus on basic research to extend knowledge and theory or on applied research intended to solve practical problems (Beder & Darkenwald, 1974). Adult education research still relied on scientific empiricism. Kidd (1979) noticed that "the majority contribution to [adult] learning may come from the natural sciences not the social sciences and many insights for adult learning came from practice" (p.6). However, researchers began to realize the limitations of scientific empiricism in adult education research and the necessity to revise research purposes and to develop its own theory (for example, Kreitlow, 1975; Mezirow, 1971; as cited in Long, Hiemstra, & Associates, 1980). Researchers introduced other theoretical foundations such as rationalism, intuitionism, empiricism and authoritarianism (Apps, 1972; Forest, 1972; Royce, 1964; Shillacc, 1973; as cited in Long, Hiemstra, & Associates, 1980).

Adult education research started to transit from the descriptive and positivist perspective to more theoretical, and multiple philosophical perspectives (Long, Hiemstra, & Associates, 1980). Long and Agyekum's (1974) study of the articles published in Adult Education indicates

that researchers still preferred descriptive design and experimental design; however, the numbers were decreasing from 1970 to 1973. More sophisticated and more qualitative-based research was replacing the descriptive and quantitative research from 1970-1973, and also in the late 1970s.

1980s

Several main factors impacted adult education research in the 1980s: the convenient access to information resources (Imel, 1989), the broad cooperation among international adult educators and the exchange of information through conferences, the dissemination of international adult education directories (Cookson, 1989), and the increase in social problems such as poverty, illiteracy, crime, racism, AIDS, political chicanery and unemployment. Researchers realized the limitation of adult education research based on the psychological perspectives and suggested to enlarge the territory of adult Education research and to revise the traditional purposes of adult education according to the new needs in society (Rachal, 1989).

In the 1980s, adult education theory underwent a rapid change. Elias and Merriam (1980) developed the philosophical foundation of adult education and a variety of perspectives on the purposes of adult education, which influenced researchers in the 1980s and even in the later decades. Researchers increasingly built their theories based on these philosophical orientations (Beder ,1989). Continuing the 1970's calling for building adult education's own theoretical foundations, adult education researchers in the 1980s pointed out some strategies to enlarge the adult education research territory, in addition to borrowing and reforming theory from different disciplines. These strategies include: generating theory unique to adult learning and development, building on critical theory, testing theory through international comparative research and synthesizing through metaresearch (Deshler & Hagan, 1989).

Researchers realized the importance of the social function of adult education and the necessity to develop multiple research methods and research purposes. In the previous decades, adult Education focused on training civic citizens, to distribute social justice, and to strengthen work related competences. In the 1980s, more researchers realized that the social functions of adult education should be stressed, and that adult education research should look at a bigger picture in addition to personal growth. For example, Courtney (1989) observed that there was lack of the "big picture" that could link adult education to society's dominant social, political and economic manisfestations. Rubenson (1989) suggested that educators should question the extent to which educational activities can connect to a broader social and political struggle.

1990s to the Early 2000s

From the 1990s to the 2000s, researchers debated on the professionalization of the field and the social purpose of adult education with different approaches and different perspectives. The purpose of adult education was to respond to societal changes such as the growing global economy, increasing cultural diversity, economic shifting from an industrial to an information-

based economy, trends in social policies and new social movements, etc. (Cunningham, 2000; Hill & Moore, 2000; Quigley, 2000; Ziegahn, 2000). In the 1980s, scholars gradually became aware of the social purposes of adult education. From the 1990s, scholars attacked the continuing focus on consensus integration and a psychology of individualism in adult education (Cunningham, 2000) and suggested to increase the social functions of adult education with different perspectives (For example, Cunningham, 2003; Heaney, 2000).

From the 1990s to the early 2000s, the field of adult education became more complex. Scholars continuously attacked the dominant scientific, rational and psychological perspectives in research and instead called for a sociological and a critical perspective (Cunningham, 2000). Critical reflection requires adult educators to examine "both the social function of adult education…and the way their own practice reproduces existing patters of inequity" (Brookfield, 2000, p.33). The perspective of critical reflection greatly influenced adult education research approaches in the 1990s, although it is challenged by the rising postmodern perspective which emphasizes the local, the provisional and the changing (Brookfield, 2000).

During this period, quantitative research declined and qualitative research increased dramatically. Sociological and critical perspectives in research were stressed, while historical research still made up a small proportion of the research methods. For example, Taylor (2001) conducted content analysis of the Adult Education Quarterly from 1989 to 1999 and pointed out that quantitative submissions declined from 45.2% in 1989 to 34.1% in 1999 and that qualitative research increased dramatically from 8.6% to 34.1% in the same time period.

Discussion

Adult education research from the 1950s through the 2000s in America shifted its focus from a descriptive reflection of practical experience and borrowing theories from other fields to starting to build its own philosophical and theoretical foundations and professionalizing the field; from heavily relying on the positivist perspective and quantitative methods to incorporating multiple perspectives and relying more and more on qualitative methods. The research approach shifted from focusing on individual growth and development from a psychological perspective to a broader social and political context of adult education from multiple perspectives. The changed goals of adult education in different decades show that the direction of adult education research was driven by the changed social needs and various internal and external social forces.

History informs and inspires the future. Decades of adult education history raised some issues about the future of adult education research. The first issue is about the identity of adult education. Adult education is built up by "borrowing" theories from other fields and by reflecting practice. The roles of adult education evolved from supporting adults' learning and solving practical problems to being more and more concerned about social problems and creating a better and just society. Though adult educators made great efforts to develop adult education's foundations and to extend the boundaries of adult education from researching individual growth to

studying adult education in a larger society, in reality, people often narrowly conceptualize adult education as educating adults to read and write and often neglect or marginalize the value of adult education. What is the uniqueness of adult education? What are the boundaries of adult education? How can it differentiate itself from other disciplines? How can we frame the discourse of adult education to enlarge its impact on society?

The second issue is about the leadership role of adult education research in influencing our society. Adult education research always reacts to the needs of society and follows the flow of society. For example, adult education research in the 1960s focused more on the topics of training when training-related activities were booming, and researchers paid attention to the social aspects of adult education in the 1980s when social problems such as poverty, illiteracy, crime, racism, and AIDS were increasing. The needs of society often drive the attention of researchers. What is the role of adult education research on guiding our life and in changing our surroundings in a positive way? How can we use adult education as a site to influence public opinion and to promote a democratic and civilized society?

The third issue is about the impact of technology on adult education research. Adult education research can be characterized by some distinct features in certain decades. Before the 1980s, adult education was influenced by other fields, especially by the field of psychology, and it was more quantitative driven. Starting from the 1980s, adult education was gradually building its own foundations. Adult education since the 1990s was heavily influenced by critical theory and multiple perspectives. Nowadays, society is more and more influenced by new technologies. "Many societal processes that have traditionally been conducted via physical mechanisms are being conducted electronically or through other virtual means" (Overby, 2008, p.277). Educators need to rethink the relationship between education and technological change and create a desirable environment to meet the emerging needs of learners and communities (Facer, 2011). The dynamics of the adult learning environment have changed dramatically compared with the past, as have the research methods and perspectives through which we study adult education. Impacted by the new technologies, conventional ideas of space, time, locations, and relationships between educators and learners are gradually changing. How can these changes impact the direction of adult education research in the future?

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Reaffirming Diversity in Higher Education through Faculty Hiring - A Leadership Perspective

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Abstract: Ongoing globalization and immigration bring diversity and rich cultural elements to American organizations at all levels. An educational environment with faculty and leaders from people of colors will set a good example for all students, especially for students of color. Higher education needs to reaffirm diversity though faculty hiring.

Demographic shifts and changing immigration patterns are the characteristics of current American society (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). The question in culture and diversity is not long whether American universities and other organizations want diversity or whether should they accommodate people from diversified cultural background, for cultural diversity are clearly the present and the future (Smith, 2009). The discussion about how to address the diversity in higher education needs to occur within a global and national context. First, addressing diversity in higher education is unique and critical because it produces teachers and leaders for schools at all levels to educate children and adults who will in turn serve and lead their nation's communities, schools, and societies in a diverse and multicultural environment by practicing their intellectual knowledge, skills, and commitments (Sergiovanni, 2007). How they are going to practice them in a heavily rely on their attitudes, ability, and experience they accumulated from their schooling (Flowers, 2004). Therefore, how higher education engage in diversity population has profound national and global implications and effects. Second, historic issues of races, gender, social class, and continuing concerns about access to higher education for underrepresented minorities and low-income students are still a challenge for higher education. Therefore, higher education and its administrations plays important role in helping "build resources through scholarship and policy that will effectively address inequities that keep the world off balance" (Smith, 2009, p.4).

Literature Review

There is little doubt that many universities and colleges shared an articulated mission for and a commitment to diversify their faculty and students. A report by the American Council on Education and the American Association of University Professors (2009) showed that 63% of their faculties believe that their universities value racial and ethnic diversity. However, rhetoric does not always match action (Stanley, 2006). Although in higher education, there is a commitment to having diverse faculty and leaders, the numbers of faculty and leaders from minority groups remain disproportionately low in comparison to white faculty (Synder & Hoffman, 2007). Therefore, minority leaders and faculty are working to break the walls on their way to be successful leaders in higher education field.