

Who are we becoming? A critical, communicative, reflective, transformative, timely inquiry into the coming-to-be of adult education in the early 21st century

Aliki Nicolaides
University of Georgia

Dominique T. Chlup
Texas A&M University

Robin Redmon Wright
Pennsylvania State University - Harrisburg, rrw12@psu.edu

Joellen E. Coryell
Texas State University

Dianne Ramdeholl
SUNY Empire State College

Follow this and additional works at: <http://newprairiepress.org/aerc>

 *next page for additional authors*

 Part of the [Adult and Continuing Education Administration Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

Recommended Citation

Nicolaides, Aliki; Chlup, Dominique T.; Wright, Robin Redmon; Coryell, Joellen E.; Ramdeholl, Dianne; and Cox, Thomas D. (2012). "Who are we becoming? A critical, communicative, reflective, transformative, timely inquiry into the coming-to-be of adult education in the early 21st century," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <http://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2012/symposia/2>

Author Information

Aliki Nicolaides, Dominique T. Chlup, Robin Redmon Wright, Joellen E. Coryell, Dianne Ramdeholl, and Thomas D. Cox

Who are we becoming?

A critical, communicative, reflective, transformative, timely inquiry into the coming-to-be of adult education in the early 21st century

Aliki Nicolaidis, University of Georgia; Dominique T. Chlup, Texas A&M University; Robin Redmon Wright, Penn State University—Harrisburg; Joellen E. Coryell, Texas State University; Dianne Ramdeholl, SUNY Empire State College; Thomas D. Cox, University of Houston—Victoria

The perspectives included in this collaborative document reflect the authors' initial inquiry to explore who are we becoming as adult educators. We present five unique points of view that our role as adult educators holds potential to help adults seek ways into their own deep inquiries of what are true, beautiful, and just ways of life. Our inquiries give expression to how might we create conditions for truth, beauty, and justice to emerge in our communities, in the systems that we work in, that govern us and that make way for our individual collective humanity? The time is ripe to ask what are the diverse structures, systems and expressions of an evolving humanity where justice, grace, beauty and truth take new shapes to meet unseen demands placed on adults around the world and what role adult education will play.

We live in the midst of complexity; the volatility of the pace of change and the volume of information have adults in a perpetual state of disorientation without the spaces to reflect or the ways to reflect in the midst of such conditions. And yet more recent research shows that reflection and leadership, in its diverse and distinct expressions, are key critical capacities to help adults meet the demands of these times and create the structures that will sustain and nurture our human purposes (Brookfield, 2010; Daloz, 1999; Heron, 1992; Kegan 1994, 2009; McCauley, 2006; Torbert, 2003; Scharmer, 2007; Schön, 1987). Adult educators are poised to create a myriad of ways to lead learning that grow and develop such capacities creating conditions for truth, beauty, and justice to find their way into their 21st century expressions.

In the essays that follow, we begin the conversation we hope to deepen while at the conference creating conditions for a mutual, transformative, and powerful exploration of "Who are we becoming" as adult educators, as a field, and as a profession. As a diverse group of newly tenured and on the tenure track based professors, we responded to this inquiry from five perspectives that we loosely organize into three themes:

- Conduct – How are adult educators evolving, in there domains of practice, as the demand for the types of contributions we make are being changed and changing? How are we preparing for an emerging unknowable future?
- Content – The role and content of adult education to help adults learn how to meet the demands of the rapid pace of change, volatile economic landscape, and the complexity of demands placed on adults, student, our selves, and the systems we hope to transform.
- Context – The rapidly changing landscape of traditional adult education in research institutions and across this country.

What follows are five short essays that present distinct views on the above themes. We organized these essays to evoke your own deep reflections that we hope you will bring forward to engage with us during this symposium session.

Good-bye, Professor:

An Era beyond the Professoriate, a Future of Alternative Professors

Dominique T. Chlup

I am getting ready to share one of my deepest secrets. Yes, you might want to read this closely. Here is the truth, when I ponder, “Who we are becoming as Adult Educators”—in ten years—I am imagining a future without me. You see, when I think of this question, I grapple with it from the perspective of a recently tenured professor of adult education. And in ten years, there is a good possibility that I will have given up my tenured position at my current prestigious, research institution. I am not even saying that I may move to another institution; I am saying I fantasize and dream of leaving academia and the professoriate behind. How many of you cringed when you read that? Smirked or judged me? Or silently thought, “Me too”? Part of me cannot believe that after all the years of graduate study and years spent working toward tenure that I would give it all up. But again, and here’s my truth, these days, while I am ubiquitously reminded that as professors and adult educators writ large, we are failing to engage, stimulate, or meet our learners’ needs, we are also failing to meet my needs as a professor.

In this paper, I present a first-person inquiry into the question of “Who we are becoming as Adult Education Professors,” or more specifically, I engage with the question of “Who I am becoming.” As I went through the tenure process, individuals who had the courage to leave the profession increasingly fascinated me. So what did I do? I began researching the phenomenon. I encountered publications with titles such as *The Black Academic’s Guide to Winning Tenure without Losing Your Soul* (Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2008), blog posts devoted to *Staying Alive: Dimensions of Academic Experience* (Tallmadge, 2011), former academics who described their time in the academy as “dying from the inside out” (Caitlin, 2011) or described their reason for leaving as “[academia] crushed my soul,” and “my soul was dying” (Kelsky, 2011a; 2011b). In my research, I often encounter the theme of institutions “killing the soul.” This comes as no surprise as I work with prisoners but to find it when studying the professoriate? What does this say about the Academy? Has the Academy become our prison?

Through my research, I found that many newly graduated, hopefully tenured, and/or newly tenured individuals still view teaching and researching as their calling, yet they can no longer envision themselves working in the Academy. As a result, they are opting out of the traditional professoriate. Have you ever heard of Dr. Gina Hiatt’s *The Academic Ladder* (<http://www.academicladder.com/>), Dr. Karen Kelsky’s *The Professor is In* (<http://theprofessorisin.com/>), Dr. Meggin McIntosh’s *The PhD of Productivity™* (<http://www.meggin.com/>), or Dr. Sally Jensen’s *Dissertation Doctor* (<http://academiccoachingandwriting.org/dissertation-doctor/>)? All are professors who consciously made the decision to leave the professoriate some pre-tenure, others post-tenure, and some even post promotion to full professor. If you are unfamiliar with their websites, spend some time and become familiar with them because these are the individuals that I argue are the next wave of the professoriate becoming what I am labeling “alternative professors.” It is this wave of professors that I am increasingly attracted to and can imagine joining.

Whether one has been pushed out, forced out, dropped out, or spirited out, I believe I will not be alone in my leaving. I believe others of you will be right there with me—some of you whom could not find tenure path jobs or found them only to be disappointed by them or loved your job but wanted something more. And lest you think I am saying it is okay to quit—I am not. Quitting is to stop trying, surrendering, accepting defeat. What I am referring to is a letting go, which involves staying open to new perspectives and alternative outcomes. So while I recognize that the only constant in life is change, occasionally, the thing we think is best for us—in my case a lifelong career as a tenured professor—may not be our destiny, but we stay open until the true path reveals itself.

Some of you will thank me for my candor. Others of you will say I was honest—perhaps too honest. Or my truth doesn't match your own. And that's okay, as I believe this symposium is meant to be the start of the conversation not *be* the conversation. For me, as I think of the future of the profession, over the next ten years, I am trusting in the significance and purpose of my life and passion, and I recognize that as we continue to evolve as professors our commitments, beliefs, and energies will need to be refocused and redefined, and for some of us, that includes transitioning into a career beyond the walls of the Academy.

Evolution of an Adult Educator

Dianne Ramdeholl

What does it mean to be an adult educator currently working in spaces already created for us by forefathers in the field? And how do we remake and renegotiate those spaces to make sense of our own current contexts as adult educators? What would/could that look like to contribute to a larger collective conversation affecting the direction of the field? What would it mean to collectively envision a sustainable, forward moving, and vibrant field that nurtures and nourishes the collective political imagination of its actors? Who are those actors? These are all questions I believe we must ask ourselves as we, younger members of the field, embody the future of the field.

As an adult literacy worker for many years, and now an assistant professor in the field of Adult Learning, I have been committed to adult education as a potential site for democratic social change. I have been involved in developing educational projects with disenfranchised populations that promote equitable socio-economic and socio-political conditions.

As adult educators, we have been fortunate in some respects because we stand on the shoulders of a long line of committed people who have, through their research and practice, made space for us as newer scholar practitioners. I believe it is up to us, working for human and social justice rights (at intersections of adult and community education) to connect with larger movements of our time, and collectively engage in theory building that then result in ways we might reframe our practice. I believe that social movements are potential sites of learning, and current struggles and movements offer us opportunities for resistance, as well as spaces in which to advance theory and practice.

As adult educators, it's essential for us to co-author new scripts that aren't rooted in domination. If we believe adult education is, in large part, about people redefining what is possible in their lives, then we must co-create sustainable spaces for that to occur. What would that look like? If, we believe the field ought to be consistent with fostering democracy, then we

must also scrutinize our own assumptions so we don't inadvertently perpetuate current power relationships rooted in inequity (however well intentioned). I'd like to speak about one such effort, upon which my dissertation was based.

An adult literacy program, called The Open Book, in Brooklyn, NY, was a counter space in which I learned the multiple ways in which people could reconceptualize themselves, if the space was there to do so.

The program highlighted a different model that recognized larger structural inequities, directly impacting students' lives that often crippled the communities in which they lived. From its inception, people's accounts pointed to an alternative vision, where collectively people could co-create new visions of what could be, as well as acknowledge the pockets of hope that already exist or are now beginning to. By students forming and participating in committees, and facilitating town hall meetings, or by space being created for students to participate in all levels of decision-making affecting the program, a more democratic environment was being supported.

Adult education represents as much as anything else an opportunity and a quest to redefine an identity that's been imposed on people by dominant ideologies. Programs can make space/become a site for students to become actors in a script in which they can re-write their lives.

If this place/space in South Brooklyn represented a microcosm of society, a different way of people being with each other that was rooted in a more humane vision of the world where equity and collectivity were the cornerstones and where treating each other with dignity and respect were as critical as the air we breathed, what were the larger implications, for us as a field, and also society at large?

To what extent is it possible to connect literacy programs that honor the history of social movements to other social justice struggles and forming partnerships grounded in social justice and the struggle for a more humane, lovelier world? If we wish our society to be different, we need to be part of that change, to work in partnerships rooted in solidarity not charity. We must work towards creating fairer, more equitable spaces, where more previously silenced voices can be heard and we must listen to what those voices are saying.

What is the 21st century discipline of Adult Education?

Thomas Cox

One need only conduct a simple search of the Chronicle or other academic job search sources to realize that position postings for professors of adult education are few and far between. Even when they are found, they are often blended into other disciplines that provide services to adults or meet a societal need. For example, a recent search revealed that a School of Medicine is seeking a curriculum designer to enhance the teaching practice of the medical school faculty. The advertisement required a Ph.D. or Ed.D. in Curriculum Design or Adult Learning. There are many increasing demands for "hybrid" adult educators in the job market today. Academic programs in Adult Education are losing ground if they do not prepare their graduates by availing them of the inter-connected nature of the workforce they face.

The question for adult education is one of whether we are going to strive to surpass the challenges of our civic function. Adult education is as old as human civilization itself and has served countless individual and collective purposes.

Historically, however, it has often emerged in periods of tension and crisis (Freer and Randall, 1982). For example, the Highlander Center for Research and Education that promoted education for social change and community action, and the great expansion of adult Jewish education through the formation of the Centre for Jewish Adult Education in Nazi Germany comprised of leading educators both formed as a tool for survival to some extent. The questions for the field of adult education that should be discussed are:

1. What will we do to ensure the survival of our field?
2. What are the factors contributing to the uncertainty of adult education as a field of study?
3. In today's economic times could a national initiative such as Center for Adult Financial Literacy come to fruition? Could an Adult Training Center for the Preservation of Environment Exist? What about Adult Education Centers for International Peace? - All relevant social concerns. From which institutions or segments of society would these emerge?
4. Is the role of formal adult education graduate degree programs one that prepares "fixed" mindset academics to exist in the ivory tower or "growth" mindset educators and practitioners that seek to inject themselves into the education of adults for the successful navigation of life?

Society is dependent on its individuals and education plays an important role in developing communities. Education provides humans with the ability to improve their performance and lifestyle by making informed choices and by forming opinions on issues concerning themselves. Adult education, like other academic fields such as Law, Engineering, Medicine and Social Work, has not emerged in a *social* vacuum. It is the product of particular historical and social circumstances or needs, and the simple observation that its emergence as a field of study at some universities and not at others does continue to attest to the uncertain nature of the field of adult education in its "pure" academic form.

It can be argued that the academic field of adult education must recognize that as a stand-alone entity it is fading away. As other disciplines in higher education institutions are focused on preparing graduates for the demands of the workplace and society, so should the field of adult education. In order to do this, we must see the "connected-ness" of our discipline to the disciplines society is seeking as solution to its problems-healthcare, economy, environment, and others. Finding ways to do this is the emerging edge of our profession as I see it.

International, cross-cultural responsiveness: A critical adult education competency

Joellen E. Coryell

The field of adult education (AE) is primed to re-envision the ways in which it attends to the rapid changes inherent in globalization processes across formal, nonformal, and informal education settings. To live and work in today's global community, adults must develop an intercultural responsiveness and flexibility with which to interact sensitively and effectively in situations involving international cultural contexts, practices, beliefs, and communications. As such, AE instructors, administrators, and learners must reflect critically in identifying how knowledge, learning, and life/work practices are globally linked and interdependent. Indeed, adult educator preparation programs must incorporate new frameworks, in which instructors and

learners co-develop cognitive, affective, and academic skills, intercultural competencies, and transformative leadership capabilities. Ways to support these new and essential outcomes include internationalizing graduate adult education program curricula and educative experiences at home and to offer opportunities to learn abroad. How to do so is essential to adult education research and practice in the next era.

Appiah (2006) suggests that today's adults need to engage in meaningful discourse employing a cosmopolitan stance. Rooted in philosophy, ethics, and education, cosmopolitanism maintains there are universal values across cultures and peoples, yet it demands a respect for legitimate differences. Appiah contends that the world's peoples currently participate in a kaleidoscope of sociocultural interactions that require people to be equipped with ideas and institutions for living together in multicultural spaces as citizens of a "global tribe." He argues that adults need to assume obligations to all others regardless of nationality, kinship, or affection, while at the same time valuing specific people's lives, not just human life in the abstract (p. xv).

Operationalizing cosmopolitan development and internationalizing university AE programs include international curricula, interaction/exchanges with international students and faculty, global research collaborations, and study abroad opportunities (Coryell, et al., 2012). Recent scholarly literature can infuse international perspectives into our curricula that traverse many different spaces, including adult literacy policies and practice, instructional methods, epistemological foundations, research methods, and postcolonial studies. Program design can incorporate intentional interactions with the campus and local community of international students, faculty, visitors, and residents. Faculty and students can engage in collaborative globalization research, which "is not the special product or province of one particular group, nation, or empire, but rather the joint product of the total experience of humankind" (Modelski, Devezas, & Thompson, 2008, p. 420). These projects transcend national borders, often to investigate trends affecting many countries/regions and global questions or concerns. Finally, incorporating study abroad programs and service offers both learners and faculty authentic experiences to develop intercultural skills and new understandings about learning and knowing in the global era.

Indeed, an examination of our current programmatic offerings will likely indicate a Western-ethnocentricity insufficient to incorporate the funds of knowledge from the alternatively developing world. We have much to learn from international research literature, through shared research and service projects, and via international cross-cultural collaborations. Multiple settings such as capacity building in international development aid, international adult higher education, global literacy initiatives, English language learning, community education, and workplace learning in a global economy await our partnership.

Cult TV, *Doctor Who*, and Fandom: Teaching Beyond Critical Media Literacy

Robin Redmon Wright, Penn State Harrisburg

I am convinced that future adult educators must grapple with the hold that media has on all of us. Corporate media is a powerful tool of the wealthy 1 percent who manipulate our economy. McLaren and Hammer (1996) are correct to point out that the "perpetual pedagogy" of "mainstream television programming. . . works as a corporate mobilization of desire for objects that are constantly misrecognized as real" (pp. 85-86). The rapid escalation of consumerism,

consumer debt, foreclosures, storage units, and anti-depressant sales in recent years supports that dark view.

Last year, my AERC paper (Wright, 2011) argued that the recent increase in Zombie films and fandom was based in the fact that corporate greed and diminishing worker rights, rewards, and satisfaction enabled people to relate to zombies. My analysis seems to have been proven true, since activists in the Occupy Movement on Wall Street and in cities across the US are dressing as Zombies. I suggest that, in the future, as we grapple with a spiraling economy, weakening US influence and prestige, a lower standard of living and an adult population that grew up under the drill-and-kill, mind-numbing legacy of *No Child Left Behind*, using elements of popular culture that have already possessed our students' imaginations as pedagogical tools may be essential.

There are plenty of books and articles that point out the self-destructive, exploitive, corporate consumer messages in advertising (Gardner, 2008), reality TV (Pozner, 2010), movies (Frymer, et.al., 2010, Giroux, 2001), the Food Network, (Wright & Sandlin, 2009) and even religious television programming (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2009). Sandlin, Schultz and Burdick's (2010) edited volume on popular culture as public pedagogy leaves little doubt that much, if not most, learning and identity development (what it means to be male, female, Black, White, citizen, straight, gay, etc.) is done informally from engaging with popular media, and most of what is learned maintains the status quo of oligarchy and social injustices. Any adult educator who wants to teach critical media literacy can find the abundance of materials almost overwhelming. It is extremely important that we, as a profession, include such material in our courses and curricula. But in addition to critical analysis of the media that saturates our culture, we must recognize that elements of critical *resistance* to corporate capitalist hegemony exist within popular media that may be used to educate as well. Much of that resistance is located within the genre of Cult TV.

Cult TV fans are constantly policing "boundaries...through opposition to the media" (Jancovich and Hunt, 2004, p. 29). Moreover, "cult television's imaginary universes support an inexhaustible range of narrative possibilities, inviting, supporting, and rewarding close textual analysis, interpretation, and inventive reformulations" (Gwenllian-Jones & Pearson, 2004, p. xii). It is these narrative possibilities and close textual analysis that provide fodder for resistant interpretations as well as resistant intentional messages.

One example of a Cult TV phenomenon with a social movement agenda is *Doctor Who*. *Doctor Who* is a U.K. production that has recently become extremely popular in the U.S. While it always had a small cult following in the U.S., the newest incarnation of the 50-year-old television series has garnered new enthusiasm among viewers on both sides of the Atlantic (and, indeed, around the world). In a recent article, (Wright, 2010) I discuss an example of one *Doctor Who* episode from 2005, "The Long Game," written by Russell T. Davies, as a criticism of the military-industrial-media complex generally, and of Rupert Murdoch's media empire particularly. Many of the episodes in the current series, as has been common through all the Doctor's incarnations, are similar political satire.

In another Davies episode from 2005, "The End of the World," the protagonist is the Lady Cassandra, a Texas widow who has had so much plastic surgery that she is basically a piece of skin stretched trampoline style across a frame—with her organs in a container beneath her. Cassandra has no regard for life other than her own in her insatiable obsessive quest for her version of perfection. She has bought what corporate America has sold her. According to

DiPaolo (2010), this episode criticizes “humans in general and Americans in particular” for being “more interested in the trappings of consumer culture—pop music, plastic surgery, fast food—than they are in preventing global warming and other ecological disasters from destroying the Earth” (p. 974).

Charles (2011) sees an even grander narrative in the newest Doctor and new head writer Steven Moffat. He believes Moffat’s narratives “suggest that if we have nothing to fear but fear itself, then by confronting that fear, by exposing ourselves to that uncanny moment of self-recognition and psychical revelation, we can turn that fear back upon itself. . . it is only through the pain of alienation that we may attain the essence of humanity” (p. 21). Since we are living in the middle of a “War on Terror” and the media saturates us with messages of fear of the other, this may be *Doctor Who*’s most profound critique of U.S and Western oligarchy. As adult educators, we should embrace the opportunity to use such fan favorites to help us teach critically.

Due to space constraints references are not presented here and are available upon request