

Kansas State University Libraries

**New Prairie Press**

---

Adult Education Research Conference

2011 Conference Proceedings (Toronto, ON,  
Canada)

---

## Canadian Adult Education: Still Moving

Tom Nesbit  
*Simon Fraser University*

Budd L. Hall  
*University of Victoria*

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



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



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

---

### Recommended Citation

Nesbit, Tom and Hall, Budd L. (2011). "Canadian Adult Education: Still Moving," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2011/papers/72>

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Adult Education Research Conference by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact [cads@k-state.edu](mailto:cads@k-state.edu).

## Canadian Adult Education: Still Moving

Tom Nesbit  
Simon Fraser University

Budd L. Hall  
University of Victoria

Keywords: Adult Education, Canada, Social Movements

**Abstract:** Two of Canada’s veteran adult educators have recently discussed what they claim as the “death” of the Canadian adult education movement. In this paper, we challenge this claim and provide evidence to show that adult education in Canada remains vigorous and vital, expanding in some areas and overall still deserving of being called a movement.

Two of Canada’s long-standing adult educators have recently contemplated what they claim as the “death” of the Canadian adult education movement. Specifically, they state, “in the span between the late 1920s and the mid-1990s, the Canadian adult education movement grew and flourished for a time but is now no more” (Selman & Selman, 2009, p. 15). We disagree. Certainly, since the demise of the Canadian Association for Adult Education in the 1980s, adult educators’ influence on government policy—at both national and provincial levels—has waned and, despite the recent flurry of energy created by the Canadian Council of Learning and its Adult Learning Knowledge Centre, it has not proved viable to found another organisation that reflects the full breadth and diversity of Canadian adult education or the extent of its reach.

Despite this, we feel that announcing the death of Canada’s adult education movement seems not only premature but highly inaccurate. From our perspective, adult education in Canada remains a vigorous and vital activity and one that still fully justifies being called a movement. We’re not alone in our assessment. In 2001, a team from the Organisation of Economic Development conducted a survey of Canadian adult learning. As their report (OECD, 2002) makes clear, almost 30% of Canadians participate in some form of adult education:

Canada has many programs to be proud of, and many models in adult education that could provide inspiration both to other providers within Canada and to other countries. The sheer size of the country, the variations among provinces, and presence of both provincial and federal initiatives means that the country has a vast amount of experimentation and innovation. (p. 8)

This view is supported by the latest background report on the development and state of adult learning and education in Canada (Council of Ministers of Education Canada, 2008) which documents Canada’s enduringly rich tradition of adult education and learning and the wide range of learning opportunities for adults. And for the past 10 years, Canada has celebrated International Adult Learners’ Week (IALW) with events from coast to coast showcasing a stunning tribute to the continuing vitality of adult learning in Canada. (Canadian Commission for UNESCO, 2010). As these reports indicate, more Canadians than ever are engaging in some form of organized adult education in a wide variety of courses and programs. Indeed, areas such as indigenous adult education and the HIV/AIDS movement are showing exciting growth through the work of new activists, practitioners and scholars.

Of course, opinions differ about what counts as a social movement or even what might be considered adult education. We understand “social movements” to be large informal groupings of individuals and/or organizations focused on specific political or social issues and intent on carrying out, resisting or undoing a social change. Social movements differ from political parties and advocacy groups and can be regarded as “collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities in sustained interaction with elites, opponents and authorities” (Tarrow, 1994, p. 4). Similarly, we take “adult education” to mean “all the approaches, processes and activities having to do with the education of, and learning by, adults and the broad set of beliefs, aims and strategies centered around the tenet that learning opportunities should be accessible to all, regardless of age, background, wealth, and status” (Nesbit, 2006, p. 17).

### **Five Trends**

Selman and Selman (2009) list five trends that they claim have brought about the adult education movement’s demise. We address each trend in turn and provide examples to refute the Selmans’ analysis.

#### *A Retreat from Collective Action*

First, the Selmans note that the degeneration of the adult education movement has occurred coterminously with a general decline in “more celebrated movements for social change” and a “retreat from collective action (p. 21). In fact, the opposite is true: levels of social action and protest are increasing. Some even argue that we are experiencing a shift towards a “social movement society” in which protest is a routine part of everyday life (Meyer & Tarrow, 1998). Indeed, it appears that Canada is one of the countries where people are more likely than not to participate in social protest: both the numbers and diversity of participants are increasing (Jenkins, Wallace & Fullerton, 2008). A recent review of Canadian activism finds that “protest activity and social movement engagement [has] undergone a rebirth, displaying levels of energy and vitality not seen since the 1960s” (Hammond-Callaghan & Hayday, 2008, p. 11).

Canadian adult educators still remain involved in such collective action as they have throughout our history, drawing inspiration from the educational activities associated with the rise of labour organizing, the suffragette and women’s movements, with the peace movements of the many wars, with economic development in the Atlantic provinces in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, with indigenous struggles for self-determination and with social justice movements of anti-racism, HIV/AIDS, class privilege, diverse sexualities, dis/ability and anti-globalization. (Hall & Turay, 2006, pp. 5-6)

Both the Canadian Commission for UNESCO and the Quebec-based L’Institut de coopération pour l’éducation des adultes (ICÉA) bring together adult educators from a variety of social movement organisations to promote and foster lifelong learning. Additionally, Canadian adult educators have been instrumental in establishing centres that carry out research on social movements—such as the Coady International Institute in Antigonish, the Transformative Learning Centre and the Centre for the Study of Education and Work in Toronto—and play an active part in many others.

As evidence of our still beating pulse, consider just one of several areas of growth and development. The emergence of a strong field of indigenous adult education led by indigenous scholars is one of the least known yet most exciting stories in this country. We now have a broad range of indigenous adult education practices being practiced, theorized and promoted. Shawn

Atleo, the national chief of the Assembly of First Nations, has a Master's degree in adult education. His mother, Marlene Atleo is a member of CASAE and an active scholar of adult education (Atleo, 2006). Eileen Antone has written extensively on aboriginal literacy and on transition to post-secondary education (Antone, 2003). The University of Victoria has three Indigenous scholars working on issues of language revitalization and retention and community-based adult learning centres in cities and on-reserve locations: Lorna Williams is the Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Learning and Knowledge (Williams & Tanaka, 2007), Onawa McIvor is Director of Aboriginal Education (McIvor, 2009) and Fran Hunt-Jinnouchi is the Director of the Office of Indigenous Affairs and has studied community-controlled indigenous adult education centres in British Columbia (Hunt-Jinnouchi, 2010). Marlene Brant Castellano was a founder of the Native Studies Centre at Trent University. Marie Battiste, a pioneer of indigenous education theory and practice, heads the Aboriginal Research Centre at the University of Saskatchewan and led the development of the Holistic Lifelong Learning Framework (Battiste, 2009). Margaret Kovach is teaching adult education and indigenous education at the University of Saskatchewan and her book on Cree epistemology underscores the ways that learning cannot be divided into categories by either age or location (Kovach, 2009).

### *Missionary Activities*

The Selmans next identify a “concern about so-called ‘missionary activities’ [where] ...adult educators were promulgating a worldview that might not be in the best interests of all those on the receiving end” (pp. 22-23). In their opinion, the notion that “one group of adults can go out and educate another group...across differences of culture and interests becomes a matter of concern” (p. 23). This approach, they claim, threatens the stability of organisations that promote such ideas and bolsters the view that to be effective, educational efforts must be closely aligned with particular interests and social groups.

We caution about getting too over-excited about this. As we indicated earlier, adult education in Canada is broad and diverse enough to encompass a variety of approaches and perspectives. Most adult education organisations are extremely reliant upon client- and learner-support and move away from their expressed needs and concerns at their peril. Also, assuming that one can successfully preach a contrasting worldview to unwitting adult learners does them a disservice. Whilst learners cannot be expected to know about specific subjects or how they might relate to other areas and broader issues or even how such subjects might be best learned, to deny that adult learners cannot therefore make reasoned judgments about what is important and what not is patronizing and demeaning.

### *The Role of Universities*

The Selmans next note a recent expansion in universities’ role in shaping the beliefs and values of adult educators. Their particular concern revolves around the increase in the “professionalization” of the field brought about by the “dedicated graduate programs, academic faculty and large continuing education units” (p. 23). We last heard this argument in the 1950s, when the late Roby Kidd was promoting the idea that adult educators deserved the same space within universities to develop their ideas and practices as any other professions, a cause to which some adult educators of the day thought akin to dining with the devil. Since then, the number of graduate adult education programs has remained relatively stable, several undergraduate programs have been developed and most universities still offer some form of continuing education. Whether this has produced the effect the Selmans claim is uncertain. Certainly, thanks

to such programs, Canadian adult education is a much more considered activity than it used to be and it's increasingly possible to now discover more about its various approaches and activities. However, the degree to which such knowledge has played "a much-larger role in shaping the beliefs and values of the field" (p. 23) would need to be determined by far more considered research.

All of the university-based adult education programs we know of are spaces where academics themselves are reflexively shaped by interaction with the practitioners who attend their courses and by their own engagement in community work. In these highly interactive spaces, knowledge and influence flows in multiple directions. Indeed, as universities struggle to meet society's changing demands they are gradually being forced to consider more learner-centred approaches. Changes in student demographics, enhanced public interest in university accountability and reductions in government fiscal support and the concomitant threat of increasing corporatisation have encouraged universities to re-examine their core activities. In particular, they are exploring their role in several areas of specific interest to adult educators: civic engagement and community outreach (Hall, 2009; Watson, 2007); challenging social exclusion (Preece, 1999); advancing citizenship, participation and social justice (Harkavy, 2006) and the role of continuing education (McLean, 2007; Osborne & Thomas, 2003). Such approaches are notable in that they draw upon the experiences and approaches of adult educators. Indeed, we note that "this pool of historical memory and practical 'how to' information is not only valuable but necessary and central to contemporary Canadian universities finding their way forward to meet the current challenges" (Hall, 2009, p. 21). So, far from being overly-affected by universities, Canadian adult education might just be exerting some influence in return.

### *Adult Education vs. Lifelong Learning*

The Selmans also identify a detrimental shift from the concept of "adult education" to that of "lifelong learning" (2009, p. 24). What adult educators call their area of work has been a thorny issue for some time and we don't propose to rehash the arguments here especially as others have presented excellent and coherent discussions of these and other related terms (Jarvis, 2009). The essence of the Selmans' concern is the potential influence of such terms on the policies and practices of adult education in Canada. Rather than delve into the nuances of terminology, we identify the practical functions that have been ascribed to whichever term is currently in vogue. For example, one discussion of the uses of lifelong learning, highlights four such functions:

- The preparation of individuals *for* the management of their adult lives.
- The distribution of education *throughout* an individual's lifespan
- The educative function *of* the whole of one's life experience
- The identification of education *with* the whole of one's life (Bagnall, 1990 pp. 5-6).

We think most practicing adult educators would accept that those functions provide the *raison d'être* and the guiding principles for much of their work. So, perhaps terminology really matters very little; adult educators continue to do their work in the best possible way regardless of what it's called. Although "lifelong learning is now a common taken-for-granted concept" (Jarvis, 2009), "adult education" has historical precedence and continues to be the term in greatest use.

### *Being Canadian?*

Finally, the Selmans note a "waning of confidence in doing things in a distinctively Canadian way" (p. 25). This seems to be a perennial concern among Canadians, perhaps partly

explained by our colonial history, the close proximity of our largest trading partner and that country's effect on our social and cultural activities. However, to claim the USA or any other country has unduly influenced Canadian adult education is highly questionable. For example, in comparison with our American colleagues, Canadian adult educators are frequent (and vocal) participants in international conferences and have played an active leadership role in international adult education organisations for many years. As a recent report indicates:

Canada's historic as well as contemporary engagement in the field of adult education and learning provides it with significant stature and credibility in the international community. Canada's efforts to share experiences and work collaboratively with other nations in addressing the challenges of the knowledge society afford it a unique leadership opportunity. (Canadian Commission for UNESCO, 2004, p.18)

Further, a recent volume in the *New Directions in Adult and Continuing Education* series brings together several Canadian scholars and practitioners to explicitly articulate a variety of historical, geographical and political positions on the field of adult education in Canada (Cranton & English, 2009). The authors address the uniqueness of Canada's emphasis on linking health and adult literacy, the use of pedagogical innovations to promote education in remote and isolated communities, the special language and cultural issues that shape Quebec's role in education and training, the emphasis on environmental issues and recent initiatives in community development. These concerns support and evince what one recent introduction to Canadian adult education calls its three main and enduring traditions:

- A set of unyielding social purposes, informed by passion and outrage, and rooted in a concern for the less-privileged.
- A systematic and sustained philosophical and critical analysis that develops the abilities to connect immediate, individual experiences with underlying societal structures.
- A keen attention to the specific sites, locations, and practices where such purposes and analyses are made real in the lives of Canadians. (Fenwick, Nesbit & Spencer, 2006, p. 17).

While such traditions may not be unique to Canada they are certainly distinctively Canadian.

### **Conclusion**

Gordon and Mark Selman's contributions to Canadian adult education over many years oblige us to take their opinions seriously and we thank them for opening up this topic for debate. However, we strongly reject their contention that the Canadian adult education movement is on its deathbed. The evidence just doesn't support it. As we've tried to show, adult education in Canada seems as vital an activity as ever, so perhaps what has changed are the players and the notion of a movement? The complexities of contemporary life require different forms of social movements with different forms of communication. So, while older scholars may see movements as consisting of, or encompassing, bureaucratized, managerial organisations, a new generation has now taken up the torch—one that considers movements to be looser and less structured groupings of the like-minded. In any case, adult education is far larger than any one organisation or group and its life as a movement is contingent upon neither bureaucratic advocacy nor (thankfully) government support. Its vitality comes from the commitment of those who engage in it and the continuing social necessity of creating an involved, informed and creative society for all.

So, as Canadian adult educators, while we might have lost the CAAE, we still manage to organise and engage in wide range of educational approaches, practices and theoretical

discussions. Our main academic organisation, here celebrating its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary, follows the same progressive and committed orientation as did the CAAE at its inception in 1935 and is arguably more committed to the practice of adult education than the CAAE was when it died in 1984. In fact, we believe that the death of the CAAE had more to do with its total dependency on federal government funding and its distance from the “movement” than in any decline of the movement itself. Our movement is still cognizant of and building upon its roots, still describing itself as part of a continuing tradition, still committed on both professional and practitioner levels to Canada’s long-term educational and societal development, still engaged with the moral, social and political concerns that engage Canadians, still attracting those who want to learn about its history, philosophies and approaches and still following in the noble adult education tradition of encouraging people to learn how to better gain control of and shape the political, cultural and creative aspects of their lives so that they can “make history instead of trying to escape it” (Flacks, 1988, p. 288). What greater proof of a movement’s vitality could we possibly need?

### References

- Atleo, M. (2006). The ancient Nuu-Chah-Nulth strategy of Hahuulthi: Education for indigenous cultural survival. *International Journal of Cultural Sustainability*, 2(1), 153-162
- Antone, E. (2003). Culturally Framing Aboriginal Learning and Literacy. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 27(1), 7-15
- Bagnall, R. J. (1990). Lifelong learning: The institutionalisation of an illiberal and regressive ideology? *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 22(1), 1-7.
- Battiste, M. (2009). *The state of Aboriginal learning in Canada: A holistic approach to measuring success*. Ottawa: Canadian Council on Learning.
- Canadian Commission for UNESCO. (2004). *Report of the Canadian delegation on the Mid-Term Review of CONFINTEA V*. Ottawa: Author.
- Canadian Commission for UNESCO. (2010). *Opening up the possibilities*. Ottawa: Author.
- Council of Ministers of Education, Canada. (2008). *The development and state of the art of adult learning and education: Canada country report*. Toronto: Author.
- Cranton, P., & English, L. M. (Eds.). (2009). *Reaching out across the border: Canadian perspectives in adult education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Fenwick, T., Nesbit T., & Spencer, B. (Eds.). (2006). *Contexts of adult education: Canadian perspectives*. Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing.
- Flacks, R. (1988). *Making history*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hall, B. L. (2009). Higher education, community engagement and the public good: Building the future of continuing education in Canada. *Canadian Journal of University Continuing Education*, 35(1), 11-23
- Hall, B. L., & Turay, T. (2006). *State of the field report: Social movement learning*. Vancouver: Canadian Council on Learning.
- Hammond-Callaghan, M., & Hayday, M. (Eds.). (2008). *Mobilizations, protests and engagements: Canadian perspectives on social movements*. Black Point, NS: Fernwood Publishing.
- Harkavy, I. (2006). The role of universities in advancing citizenship and social justice in the 21st Century. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, 1(1), 5-37.
- Hunt-Jinnouchi, F. (2010). *Transitions From aboriginal-controlled post-secondary institutes to public post-secondary institutions*. Victoria, BC: University of Victoria Office of Indigenous Affairs.

- Jarvis, P. (Ed.). (2009). *The Routledge international handbook of lifelong learning*. New York: Routledge.
- Jenkins, J. C., Wallace, M., & Fullerton, A. S. (2009). A social movement society? *International Journal of Sociology*, 38(3), 12-35.
- Kovach, M. (2009). *Indigenous methodologies: Characteristics, conversations and contexts*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- McIvor, O. (2009). Strategies for indigenous language revitalization and maintenance. In *Encyclopedia of language and literacy* (pp. 1-12). London, ON: Canadian Language and Literacy Research Network.
- McLean, S. (2007). About us: Expressing the purpose of university continuing education in Canada. *Canadian Journal of University Continuing Education*, 33(2), 65-86.
- Meyer, D. S., & Tarrow, S. (Eds.). (1998). *The social movement society*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Nesbit, T. (2006). Introduction. In T. Fenwick, T. Nesbit & B. Spencer (Eds.), *Contexts of adult education: Canadian perspectives* (pp. 13-22). Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing.
- Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD]. (2002). *Thematic review on adult learning: Canada*. Paris: Author.
- Osborne, M., & Thomas, E. (Eds.). (2003). *Lifelong learning in a changing society: Continuing education in the universities of Europe*. London: NIACE.
- Preece, J. (1999). *Combating social exclusion in university adult education*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Selman, G., & Selman, M. (2009). The life and death of the Canadian adult education movement. *Canadian Journal of University Continuing Education*, 35(2), 13-28.
- Tarrow, S. (1998). *Power in movement: Social movements and contentious politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Watson, D. (2007). *Managing civic and community engagement*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Williams, L., & Tanaka, M. (2007). Schalay'nung sxwey'ga: Emerging cross-cultural pedagogy in the academy. *Educational Insights*, 11 (3).