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Lucy Wilcox Adams: Early Advocate of Discussion-Based Adult Education

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Abstract: *The writings of Lucy Wilcox Adams as well as both historical and contemporary adult education literature were analyzed for the purposes of (1) examining the role of women in the development of the field; (2) discerning the development of Adams' ideas regarding discussion-based adult education; and (3) comparing and contrasting her ideas with other literature.*

In the early years of the field of adult education in the United States, women were prominent contributors to the literature of the field. For example, the first handbooks were edited by women and many women wrote chapters for those handbooks. Mary Ely served as editor of the *Journal of Adult Education* from its inception in 1929 until 1940, and women were represented as authors of journal articles. Women also authored or coauthored 10 of the 28 volumes in the series, *Studies in the Social Significance of Adult Education in the United States*, published by the Association for Adult Education between 1937 and 1941. After 1948, when the handbook was edited by Mary Ely, until 1990, when Sharan Merriam and Phyllis Cunningham edited the handbook, the presence of women in the handbook series was marginalized, with most chapters being written by white males (Cervero & Merriam, 2007). Beyond the handbook, women's presence as contributors to the literature base was nearly invisible during this period as well.

In an effort to learn more about the early women contributors, research (Imel & Bersch, 2008) that involved a descriptive analysis of volumes 1-13 of the *Journal* was undertaken. In this initial phase of the research, Lucy Wilcox Adams' name surfaced. Between 1932 and 1941, she authored a total of 5 *Journal* articles (Adams, 1932b; 1933; 1935; 1938; 1941) as well as a piece (Adams, 1932a) that appeared in the "Why Stop Learning" section of the *Journal* and that was later reprinted in *Adult Education in Action* (Ely, 1936) under the section on Public Forums.

The next phase of the research (Imel & Bersch, 2009) involved a more in-depth study of four of the women: Wilcox Adams, Jesse Allen Charters, Mary Ely, and Dorothy Canfield. This phase focused primarily on autobiographical information. The current research analyzed Adams' published writings as well as autobiographical information received from her grandson, Ernest Adams, and used sources from adult education in a number of areas for the purpose of (1) examining the role of women in the development of the field; (2) discerning the development of Adams' ideas regarding discussion-based adult education; and (3) comparing and contracting her ideas with other literature.

The Role of Women in the Field's Development

After the early period, why did women move from the center to the margins as contributors to the literature base and in the histories of the field? The literature contains a number of explanations for this invisibility. In her analysis of the how the history of adult education reflects gender, Hugo (1990) found that women were represented both as writers and as active members of the field in the field-sponsored publications of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. However, the names of women were virtually absent from the field's histories (e.g. Grattan, 1955; Knowles, 1977), all of which were written by men. She cites three main reasons

for the lack of visibility of women and their contributions in the histories, including the field's concern with establishing credibility that influenced how the field developed and professionalized; the fact that men held the power in terms of defining the field and tended to only pay attention to what other men said or wrote; and finally, that the data sources used to develop the histories reflected male experiences.

Like Hugo, Thompson and Schied (1996) also found that women were active contributors to the field's development but that their contributions were not acknowledged in the histories. In their research that used critical language study analysis to examine the field's journals, they cite reasons similar to those of Hugo's for the "historical invisibility of women" (p. 124). They also suggest that the field's "relatively egalitarian" attitude toward and about women in the early years, did not reflect mainstream societal attitudes and that the field's early leaders "were indeed the odd ones out in terms of ideas about women's roles" (p. 136). But, later the field fell more into line with societal attitudes about women's roles and thus the marginalization began.

Even at the end of the 20th century, women's contributions to the literature base as well as their role in the development of the field continued to be marginalized. In 2001, the second edition of *Twentieth Century Thinkers in Adult Education* (Jarvis, 2001) was published. Unlike the first edition, published in 1987, this edition did include women among the seventeen leaders whose contributions as "major thinkers" were highlighted. But, with the exception of K. Patricia Cross-- whose career warranted its own chapter--the contributions of women were all treated in one chapter (Leicester, 2001). Leicester suggests "that the lack of female guru figures in adult education tells us more about sexism in adult education than about a genuine lack of female contributions to theory and practice" (p. 297).

Lucy Wilcox Adams was active during the early years of the field, a time when the field's attitude toward women was more egalitarian than in subsequent years (Thompson & Schied, 1996). But, like other women of her era, the sexism that came to predominate the field meant that she and other women were left out of the field's histories.

The Contributions of Lucy Wilcox Adams?

Lucy Wilcox Adams participated in the initial development of the California Association for Adult Education (CAAE) that was established with a grant from the Carnegie Foundation. The goal of the Association was to provide adults opportunities to participate in open group discussion and study under trained leaders to promote awareness of public issues and participation in individual or community action. In August 1929, Adams was hired as the secretary-organizer for the Association, working with Lyman Bryson, its director. Because Adams found Bryson to be a supervisor who was willing to share responsibility, the job offered her many opportunities for development. With Bryson's encouragement, she was soon leading groups known as forums; she also became a frequent contributor to the *Journal of Adult Education* and served as an instructor at adult education institutes that trained leaders (Personal Communication with E. Adams, 2008).

While she was with CAAE, Adams' articles (1932a,b; 1933; 1935) focused on discussion-based adult education that was the hallmark of the forum movement. Key ideas from these articles and sections of her unpublished autobiography include the following:

- **Purpose of Education.** Education should provide a bridge between the ideas of original thinkers and discussion group participants, but education for a specific

purpose is the same as propaganda (1932b; 1933). It should also provide “the freedom and opportunity for men and women to satisfy their intellectual and artistic wants and to enlarge their horizons” (1932b, p. 142) as well as “stimulate intelligent thought that will be carried over into action [by creating] an alert public capable of being roused on particular issues” (1933, p. 410).

- **Group Leadership.** Leaders were to serve as guides and resources, not as teachers. “The leaders who succeed are those who go as scientists and investigators, not those that have a body of facts to deliver” (1932a, p. 63) Lack of qualified leaders was a problem (1932a; 1933; Personal Communication with E. Adams, 2008).
- **Learning Environment.** Discussion groups should be characterized by “good talk,” and the informal exchange of opinions. Although all participants may not engage in discussion, they will be reading and studying. Leadership may emerge from within the group and discussion may continue after the formal ending of a session (1932a). Too little attention has been paid to the importance of emotions in learning (1935).
- **Civic Education.** During the 1930s, the forum was the predominate form of civic education, sometimes called education for democracy because its purpose is to prepare citizens for their role in a democratic society. Adams believed that a national civic education movement could accomplish three things: (1) assist participants develop habits that would allow them to thoughtfully consider public matters and prevent “mass hysteria;” (2) develop intelligent cooperation in carrying out public policies; and (3) create a public that is “critically hospitable to new ideas” (1933, p. 414).

Adams’ writing on discussion-based adult education displayed an increasingly critical perspective. Her initial article (1932a) about library-based discussion groups was guardedly optimistic about what they could achieve, although she did say “it would be easy to exaggerate the[ir] importance” (p. 63). In a 1935 article that traced the development of forums from 1929 to 1934, Adams wrote that later forums have “ceased to be educational bodies and have become either propaganda groups or platforms for the rehearsal of prejudice” (p. 24). Despite her disillusionment with the later forum movement in California, she remained a believer in the importance of public discussion groups for providing a neutral place that allowed free speech and a “testing ground for warring opinions” (p. 25).

The untimely death of Adams’ spouse, William, left her as the single parent of two young sons. She left California and the field of adult education and began work with the US Department of Interior’s Office of Indian Affairs. Her last two articles to appear in the *Journal* (1938; 1941) deal with her work with Native Americans; both reflect her beliefs about adult education. Adams (1938) observed that the Indian council or powwows closely resembled discussion groups or community forums because all plans were discussed and no actions taken until consensus was reached. Furthermore, much adult education was taking place through self-initiated, self-directed forms of learning when adults gathered at the schools designed for youth. The schools were often the focus of community life and usually offered services such as bathhouse, laundry, sewing room, shop, and health clinics. When adults came in to use the services they frequently talked to one another about common concerns and learned from each other (Adams 1941). After 1941, Adams’ name disappeared from field-based publications; she

went on to work in war relocation efforts and with USAID, serving in Iran and Korea. Forced to retire at age 65, she went to UC-Berkley where she served as an adjunct professor in a special program to train foreign service personnel (Miscellaneous Obituaries of Anthropologists, n. d.)

Comparison with Perspectives in Other Literature

In her writing, Adams did not refer to any of her contemporaries in the field (other than Lyman Bryson) but clearly she was aware of the national movement. In order to compare and contrast Adams' perspectives about discussion-based adult education, sources from the field were reviewed. For the most part, Adams' ideas about discussion-based adult education mirrored those found in both historical and more contemporary sources. Some key observations include the following:

- **Purpose.** Both historical and contemporary sources reflect views about purpose of discussion-based adult education that are similar to those of Adams. Adams shared Lindeman's (1926) perspective that although it should not be propaganda, it should lead to some sort of action. Like Ely (1937) and Lindeman (1926), she believed it had to involve participants in more than just question and answer sessions; an exchange had to take place that allowed participants time to thoughtfully reflect on differing perspectives. And, like Lindeman (1926) and Brookfield and Preskill (2005), she believed that discussion should help participants develop a critically informed perspective of a topic to become more skilled in looking for assumptions underlying various viewpoints—both theirs and others.
- **Democracy.** Closely related to purpose is a theme of democracy that runs through both historical and contemporary sources on discussion-based adult education. In her article, "Salvaging Democracy," Adams (1933) links discussions to the development of good citizens and also warns that "the danger in all forums lies in the creation of an impression that the problems of government and society are simple and can be settled by discussing them" (p. 410). Both Ely (1937) and Studebaker (1935) also felt that discussion furthered democracy by helping participants develop critical attitudes about civic issues and perhaps engage in further study. Contemporary sources such as Boggs (1991), Brookfield and Preskill (2005), Keith (2007), and Welton (2002) also link democracy to forms of discussion-based adult education. Brookfield and Preskill, for example, say that "discussion and democracy are inseparable because both have the same root purpose—to nurture and promote human growth" (p. 3).
- **Leadership.** In her writing, Adams did not refer to Lindeman (1926) but her ideas about discussion are quite consistent with his, particularly as related to leadership. Both believed that teachers should be leaders and "evoke" rather than "profess" (Lindeman, 1926, p. 188). Like Lindeman (1926) and Studebaker (1935), Adams also believed that participants should feel free to disagree with and/or question the opinions of leaders.

Implications for Theory and Practice

Some of the implications for the development of adult education theory and practice revealed from the results of the analysis include the following:

- Greater attention should be focused on the field's history for it includes practices relevant for contemporary adult education programs and practice. Articles by Adams cover the period of the Great Depression and reflect how discussion-based adult education helped adults engage in genuine and civilized talk about issues associated with a democratic society. Keith (2007) sees parallels to the 21st century when "people are struggling to reinvent participatory democracy" (p. 2).
- Greater attention to contemporary practices in informal, discussion-based adult education could support further development of theory. Because these forms of adult education frequently occur in informal or nonformal settings, its role in adult learning is largely unacknowledged. For example, it is not captured in the statistics on adult education collected by the U. S. Institute of Educational Science's National Center for Education Statistics that reflect only participation in formal adult education.
- Mentoring is an overlooked process that could be used to improve adult education practice. Adams was mentored by Lyman Bryson and was able to develop her ideas and skills related to discussion-based adult education. She had an opportunity to reflect on her practice and make changes in her approach.
- Contemporary adult learning theory that advocates critical thinking, discussion, listening, and reflection supports discussion-based adult education. More emphasis on training practitioners in using these approaches could advance practice.
- More efforts should be made to uncover women's contributions to the field and include them in the field's histories. As suggested by Hugo (1990), these efforts should move beyond just restoring women to their rightful place and include a critical examination of previous analyses of the field that investigate the assumptions based on gender.

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