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AERC Address

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Phyllis Cunningham
AERC ADDRESS—Chicago 2009

I started graduate school in 1965 and it was then that I began to identify with the field of AE.

1) **the sixties/mid seventies** were characterized by the psychologizing of the field- Knowles hegemony on adult learning was being established at the same time that the streets were filled with protestors regarding Viet Nam-racism/ civil rights- and women's rights. What happened in the streets has never seemed to affect adult education. Bureaucratized AE has always seemed to me to be one of the most conservative of the professional groups.

This did not mean there were not resisters: when Neil Armstrong stepped out on the moon—all but one of the 23 full time AE graduate students at the U of C were huddled together writing our manifesto declaring our strike against the faculty demanding more say in our curriculum and student representation at faculty meetings. Some of us went on to participate in the takeover of the administration building, to attend the national SDS meeting, and to get out in the streets to actively work for social justice in our praxis of adult education.

However, on most campuses, history and sociology and the concept of power were washed out of most curriculums in graduate education; adult learning, behavioral objectives and evaluation became the core of the many grad programs springing up around the country.

So for me from the start—our field has been one of inside outside—inside a very conservative by the numbers white operation and in those early days one run by men. And on the outside a very different world -racially diverse, poor & disenfranchised. I had a foot in both worlds.

2) **The late seventies/eighties** were marked by a number of disruptions in the field. Freire was translated into English in the early seventies. Freires' work sparked an interest in a more critical approach to practice. Critical theory came into its own and every body learned to quote Habermas even if he remained a disembodied theorist out there somewhere. In particular, on the ground, the work of John Ohliger has to be viewed as singularly important. Over the next twenty years Ohliger kept up a constant critique of the failure of mainstream adult education to pursue the goals of social justice in their work.

Myles Horton and Highlander resurfaced as well in this period. Highlander nurtured a number of resistance groups—the Lindeman Center in Chicago; the Paulo Freire Center in Berkeley; the Peace and Justice work in Minneapolis as well as Basic Choices in Madison. Ruetgers carried on a strong Freirian outreach from their university And NYC and Denver provided Freirian annual programs And in Canada Budd Hall had taken over

ICAE and under his leadership our field began to be internationalized with emphasis on the global south and indigenous populations.

These scattered resistances were brought together from time to time by developing a north American group and holding conventions. These groups The National Alliance for Voluntary Learning and its successor the North American Alliance of Popular and Adult Education existed for about six years. Political battles were fought within the associations—in AERC the battle took the form of pre-conferences/ caucuses (the African American pre conference-women’s caucus—the GLBT caucus) and the clash over methodologies (only qualitative are accepted). In the AAAAE there were rump sessions in Detroit, organized action among delegates in Boston and a Mock trial in Denver putting the association on trial for “failure in its original commitment to provide education of citizens to participate in democratic social action.” The Association was found guilty on all counts but the resulting policy paper (Faded Visions and Fresh Commitment: Adult Educations Social Goals) written by Jack Meizrow was never published but it can be found on the NLU web site. History also made a remarkable recovery led by Stubblefield and Schied—especially labor history and its relationship to AE.

3) **Late Eighties/nineties**-The counter hegemonic alternatives that sprung up in the last decades fade as HRD takes over in the field and higher Ed takes over in the academy. Strong weapons such as participatory research has been hijacked by the professions and the world bank. Criticality is defanged—everyone can be critical as long as nothing changes in power relationships. We have made some advances on the diversity front in that we see more color and gender differences in our audiences but class still remains an issue.

I don’t hear about many students writing manifestos—the most exciting AE potential seems to me to be going on in Obama land. ACORN is getting blasted regularly so they must be doing something. I just signed up to organize and educate for health care. The edited books on critical AE I have read in the last twelve months that I have found exciting and stimulating do not have a single US author. I am not optimistic about the future of organized professionalized AE.

In summary, I think the field had its origins in a social context and more non-formal learning. As AE has moved to a more professionalized base it has lost much of that relationship to real life and citizenship. We are no longer co-learners; we no longer see ourselves as space makers so that others can produce their knowledge. We rarely see learners as knowledge producers rather than knowledge consumers.

I recently read on the CPAE BLOG that we had better keep the GRE as a gate keeping mechanism or we would not be judged seriously by our University peers as running quality programs. With this breathtaking leap of leadership I commit you to your fate.