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AERC: Research and Practice

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Recommended Citation

Knox, Alan B. (2009). "AERC: Research and Practice," *Adult Education Research Conference*.
<https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2009/panels/3>

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AERC: Research and Practice
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University of Wisconsin

I appreciate this opportunity to share a few reflections on adult education research fifty years ago and today. The first snapshot is the formation of AERC, and its relation to the field of practice in the 1950s. The second snapshot is future directions regarding relations between scholarship, professional practice, society, and the importance of leadership on behalf of scholarly practice to benefit adult learners and society.

FORMATION

During the 1950s, shifts were occurring in both the field and society. Two associations disbanded to form the Adult Education Association of the USA.(AEA) The Ford Foundation created the Fund for Adult Education, which assisted AEA, and the Center for the Study of Liberal Education for Adults (CSLEA). CSLEA was located near the University of Chicago, where Cy Houle and his adult education graduate program was graduating prominent scholars and practitioners, including Malcolm Knowles who was already executive director of AEA, and Alex Charters who was dean of continuing education at Syracuse University.

In those years, I was a full time administrator of residential adult education with Alex, was the first doctoral graduate of the program at Syracuse, was active with CSLEA including part of a year as a visiting fellow, and chaired an AEA section on residential adult education in which Myles Horton from Highlander was an active member. In the mid 50s, I served concurrently as chair of three national association research committees: AEA, National University Extension Association, and Association of University Evening Colleges. Each committee had few members, and a very limited purpose (reviewing applications to survey members).

As a member of the American Educational Research Association, whose annual meeting alternated between New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, I benefited from interactions with other scholars, who were mainly interested in preparatory education of young people and not education of adults. I knew and contacted current and recent doctoral students in adult education graduate programs, and arranged to meet separately for a day or two preceding AERA. This enabled us to have a dozen or more participants, include some CSLEA staff, allow and encourage those interested to stay on for AERA, and keep costs low.

Early meetings,(and materials shared before, during, and after) emphasized sharing and discussing each of our past, current, and future research interests, results, and directions. With that familiarity, the focus shifted to collaborative research on topics such as participation, achievement, persistence, and financial arrangements. My move in 1960 to serve as associate director of the University of Nebraska Center for Continuing Education, in charge of studies and training, enhanced my contribution to the early years of AERC. Kellogg Foundation support, starting a new adult education graduate program, and my interaction with my evaluation counterparts at other Kellogg Centers, supported the basic year around activities of cooperating AERC members, so

there were no fees. All of the professors of adult education (through AEA commission of Professors of Adult Education, CPAE) were devoted to completion of the "Black Book", so did not participate in AERC, however, other researchers, such as John Johnstone (Volunteers for Learning) did participate and contribute to panel presentations on recent research at various association conferences.

After a few years initiating and coordinating AERC (originally called National Seminar) participants who continued became an informal committee, so after about four years when I suggested a successor as chair several were interested, and there was a smooth transition and steady growth. By that time, CPAE members had completed their book, the number of graduate programs in the field was starting to increase, CPAE meetings began increasing attention to research, external research funding opportunities were expanding, and professors and their current and former graduate students increasingly participated in AERC.

Adult education practice and research were each influenced by perceptions of organizations, media, and society generally. Change, learning and education were associated with young people, and it was assumed that adult education was marginal and remedial for people who had missed out earlier. Educational institution practices discouraged older and part time students in the regular programs.

FUTURES

By contrast, today's image is that change and learning are widespread, lifelong, and important for individual, organizational, and societal functioning. Many adults still confront barriers to participation, but few people would have predicted fifty years ago today's acceptance of adult learning as a central, desirable and feasible part of meeting the many major challenges that we confront. It is central to progress on public issues such as: peace, terrorism, economy, health, poverty, sustainability, justice, education, corrections, and immigration.

A field wide vision of practice and scholarship is basic to some organizations, such as: graduate programs, AAACE, AERC, and regional research to practice conferences. CPAE faculty and their current and former graduate students are central for such organizations, and to field wide books and journals. In recent years, the AAACE strategic plan and the futures column in Adult Learning and items on the website have emphasized a field wide vision, collaboration, and professionalization.

A draft chapter on Professionalization, in the forthcoming 2010 Handbook notes about fifty national associations composed of people working in specialized segments of the field. Some, such as university extension and outreach, and continuing medical education, have created special meetings to bring practitioners and scholars together to strengthen mutually beneficial connections between research and practice. The Handbook chapter on Professionalization notes four broad career stages: Entry (volunteers and paid staff beginning to work full or part time, without benefit or awareness regarding publications, courses, technology, or assistance; Creative (practitioners who are using communities of practice, publications, and conferences to enrich their performance through greater understanding of influences, opportunities, and strategies); Transformation (practitioners whose enhanced understanding of

themselves, the field, and society enables them to collaborate, share and benefit); and Transcendent (leaders from throughout the field whose future oriented global perspective helps them contribute to professionalization in the field, and cooperate with leaders addressing major public issues).

Probably more than half of people working in the field are at entry and creative career stages. As in some occupations such as social work, acting, and journalism most people enter adult education practice without formal preparation and certification. With fifty separate specialized national associations of people working in various segments of the field, lack of a field wide vision reduces collaboration and learning from other segments of the field. Research and scholarship is central to contributions by graduate programs and field wide organizations such as AERC and AAACE.

Scholarly practice is especially important for the transcendent career stage. A transcendent capability can enable provision of greatly enhanced benefits to learners, organizations and society. Local and regional professional development opportunities for practitioners at all career stages, in which graduate programs in a region collaborate with local provider organizations and associations, can demonstrate unusually high levels of program quality and benefits. Evidence of local impact can help justify continued support by their own institution for graduate programs in the region. The base of knowledge and experience is ample now. The future of a broad field of adult and continuing education depends mainly on our own vision and leadership.