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Who Were the Women? An In-Depth Analysis of Some Early Women Adult Educators

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This analysis of early women adult educators focuses on four women—Lucy Wilcox Adams, Jesse Charters, Mary L. Ely, and Dorothy Canfield Fisher—who contributed to the early development of the field.

In the early years of the field of adult education in the United States, women were prominent contributors to the growth of the field, particularly to the literature base. Previous publications provide some explanation for why women moved from the center to the margins as contributors to the field's literature base after the early period, but no extended analysis of the early women contributors has been conducted. This research project is designed to address that gap. The initial phase of the project (Imel & Bersch, 2008) examined the roles of women in developing the literature base from 1926-1941, the types of literature produced, and the connections or networks that may have fostered their efforts. The second phase of the study focuses on a more in-depth analysis of four of the women: Lucy Wilcox Adams, Jesse Allen Charters, Mary L. Ely, and Dorothy Canfield Fisher.

Lucy Wilcox Adams

Lucy Wilcox Adams was active in the California Association for Adult Education (CAAE) between 1929 and 1935. In 1929, at the time California received Carnegie Foundation funds to organize CAAE, Lucy was hired to work with the director, Lyman Bryson, to serve as organizer and secretary. Within the association, she was active in developing discussion groups, frequently in conjunction with her spouse William Forbes Adams, a professor of history at UCLA. In 1933, Carnegie funding for CAAE ended and Bryson left California to become director of the Des Moines adult education Forums programs, and Lucy became CAAE's director. Due to the untimely death of her spouse, she was forced to seek other employment in 1935 (Personal Communication with E. Adams, 2008). During her six years in adult education she was a major contributor to the American Association for Adult Education's (AAAE) *Journal of Adult Education*, authoring five articles plus at least one piece for the section, "Why Stop Learning," that was reprinted in *Adult Education in Action* (Ely, 1936) in the section on Public Forums. Even after Lucy left the organized field of adult education, her work with many federal agencies involved adult education activities. Forced to retire from government service at the age of 65, she taught at University of California-Berkeley until the age of 70, when again mandatory retirement caught up with her. (For more details on the life of this fascinating woman, see her obituary: <http://www.obitcentral.com/obitsearch/obits/misc/anthro8.htm>).

Jessie Allen Charters

At the age of 48, Jesse Allen Charters came to Ohio State University (OSU) and launched what was to become the graduate program in adult education. In 1928, when her spouse W. W.

Charters, was hired to be the director of the OSU Bureau of Educational Research, she came with him to undertake an experiment in parent education for the Ohio Department of Education and OSU. Two years later, the Department of Adult Education was established with Jessie Charters as chair, making her the first woman professor in adult education in the United States. The Charters chose to come to OSU because of W.W.'s personal objective of giving "Mrs. Charters an opportunity to return to her career." Unfortunately, Jesse's career in adult education was cut short due to the depression when lack of funds forced the university to cut her salary in 1931 and again in 1933 (The Ohio State University Archives, W. W. Charters [RG: 40/p/117]). She resigned on June 30, 1933 (OSU Payroll records). During Jesse's time in Ohio, she developed programs in alumni education, wrote articles for national publications, and was active in establishing Ohio's adult education association, the Ohio Conference on Adult Education.

Dorothy Canfield Fisher

Dorothy Canfield Fisher was perfectly situated to be an early player in the field of adult education. Dorothy's father had been librarian at Columbia and Dorothy had earned her Ph.D. from Columbia in 1904. She was acquainted with Frederick Keppel and others. In 1907, she married John Fisher, also a Columbia graduate. Dorothy was already a well-established author when Keppel asked her to write an early book about the field, *Why Stop Learning?* (1926). According to Morse Cartwright the book "received a wide distribution and gave the whole field its first general treatment in highly readable form The reaction of both the educational leaders and the more thoughtful portion of the public was immediate and gratifying" (Cartwright, 1935, p. 15). Dorothy served as AAAE president for two one-year terms: 1932/33 and 1933/34. In 1935, she wrote the introduction for Cartwright's book, *Ten Years of Adult Education*, and she also wrote six articles for *Journal of Adult Education*, two of which appeared in *Adult Education in Action* (Ely, 1936). The key role she played on the selection committee for the Book-of-the-Month Club from 1926-1951 created an opportunity for millions of adults to access good literature (Yates, 1958; Washington, 1982).

Mary L. Ely

Dorothy Canfield Fisher was the famous and visible woman, but, within AAAE, Mary Lillian Ely was the worker bee. In the preface to *Women in Two Worlds* (1938), Mary reports she drew upon her experience as former Education Director of the National League of Girls Clubs but no doubt her college work in Latin and Greek and her work in the 1920s as a writer/advertiser and educational secretary came in handy in her adult education writing and editing work. Mary was at the heart of the adult education action for just over two decades from the time she began to work for AAAE, under Morse Cartwright and became, first the co-editor, then editor, of the *Journal of Adult Education*. Mary and Cartwright wrote *Adult Education in the United States of America* (1929), and she edited the summary of the proceedings of AAAE's Tenth Anniversary Celebration included in the *Journal* [Vol 8(3)] and *Adult Education in Action* (1936). To gather information for her book, *Why Forums* (1937), she traveled from one end of the country to the other. She collaborated with Eve Chappell, a former newspaper reporter, to co-author *Women in Two Worlds* (1938). Both books were part of the AAAE Studies in the Social Significance of Adult Education in the U.S. In the 1940s she worked as a freelance writer. In 1948, she edited the *Handbook of Adult Education in the U.S.*

References available upon request.