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Developing Knowledge and Theory in the Field of Adult Education: Research Conferences in the 1960's

Catherine A. Hansman and Amy D. Rose

Abstract: This historical study examines the role of research and the development of adult education research conferences, including the eventual founding and establishment of the Adult Education Research Conference (AERC). What role did research and research conferences play in developing the field of adult education?

Keywords: profession, research, history

The academic study of adult education in the United States has always been a somewhat precarious venture. There have been periodic spasms of growth and cutbacks since graduate programs were first started in United States in the early 1930s. We began this work by asking ourselves, what has led to this state of affairs? How did this entity called adult education develop as an area of study? What role did research and research conferences play in developing the field? Who were the primary players and what did they do to encourage (or discourage) this development?

This historical study utilizes published articles and archival materials from Syracuse University. Our focus in this paper is the role of research and the development of adult education research conferences from the 1950's to the early 1970's, including the eventual founding and establishment of the Adult Education Research Conference (AERC). The development of the Commission of Professors of Adult Education (CPAE) and the AERC were fairly contemporaneous.

The development of the academic field of Adult Education coincided with a major push emphasizing research throughout higher education, so the CPAE members also understood the need to conduct and/or write about research in order to gain tenure and promotion at their institutions. The founding of the CPAE in 1957 provided a structure that allowed professors to not only discuss and plan adult education graduate programs but also deliberate concerning research. While the early meetings of the CPAE focused primarily on establishing and improving graduate study, another constant theme was the importance of research and the need to enhance the research being conducted (London, 1961). During the 1950s and 1960s, the need to conduct research, the need to learn research methods, and the need to understand, in a comprehensive fashion, the state of adult education research became the focus of many debates and arguments among adult education professors.

Incorporated into these discussions were the need for clearly delineating adult education as an university-based area of study, including the development of theory; defining *who* exactly adult educators are and *what* they do; and analyzing various structures created to *systematize* this emerging field. However, it would be a mistake to think that these developments followed a rational course. There were disagreements, feuds, and conflicting ideologies. They asked, "What is research in adult education?" Additionally they wondered "does adult education research have specific and unique methods or is it more a question of adaptation of other methods?" Finally, they also asked "who should conduct adult education research and what should the relationships among researchers focused on adult education be?"

By 1964 the CPAE planned the “next steps of cooperatively planning, obtaining support for, and conducting adult education research as a means of more rapid developing the knowledge and practice of the field (Jensen, March 11, 1964). They put forward suggestions concerning the kinds of research in which they could engage and how research could be conducted collaboratively. They formulated the idea of a new conference devoted solely to research concerning Adult Education theory and practice. This led to the establishment of research conferences and groups, including: The AEA’s *Commission on Research*, the *National Seminar on Adult Education Research (NSAER)*, and by 1970, *the Adult Education Research Conference (AERC)*. Only AERC is still functioning as an annual research conference.

As we look at the early period of adult education as an academic area of study certain trends and issues become clear. The first is the overwhelming sensation that very little has changed. In these early years, faculty members were writing about the importance of theory and the importance of research, but they often failed to connect the two and rarely tried to establish a connection to practice. While many members of this small group remained committed to practice, there was a continuous focus on improving research; learning new research methods; and in general establishing a better grounding in scientific methodology. However this focus created a new set of tensions. These tensions were further reflected in the different, and at times competing, research meetings and conferences planned and conducted during these years.

Secondly, we are struck by the effort to delineate the field by limiting who could participate. This boundary setting involved a very clear demarcation about who could participate in the Commission of Professors of Adult Education and at least initially, who could attend and present their research at the research conferences. While the CPAE’s stated purpose was to disseminate information and make it useable, it was clearly the role of the faculty experts to decide what should be diffused.

Additionally, these professors and the field in general, were markedly placed in a marginal position in terms of both their place in academe and in the profession itself. However, they also tended to isolate themselves. While they recognized the importance of collaboration; of consulting with government entities; and of being aware of the huge social changes and upheavals occurring during the 1950s and 1960s, they were not able to fully incorporate them into their work. Toward the end of the 1960s, there were calls to change the research paradigm. One of those leading this charge was Jack Mezirow, who is now known as the father of transformative learning theory, but who was then deeply disenchanted with disembodied and objective approaches to research. Both he and others wanted to more closely ally research with theory-building rather than presenting them as separate entities.

As we look at the current state of adult education - particularly the lack of funding and the failure to fully incorporate it into the educational agenda, we recognize that these current issues are the same problems that surfaced fifty years ago. The professors reacted then by asserting control over their own areas and trying to exclude others, at times marginalizing others as they themselves were marginalized outside of their field. However, at the end they were still limited by their own sense of themselves as researchers and builders of a field. This historical research is significant because it dissects and illuminates the notions about research that framed the early development of the field but are still evident in present day academic Adult Education.

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