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## Abandoned Places of Adult Education in Canada and Germany

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## Abandoned Places of Adult Education in Canada and Germany

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### Introduction

This paper introduces some of the themes and stories that are included in the upcoming German-English volume *Abandoned Places of Adult Education in Canada and Germany* (K pplinger & Elfert, 2018). Bernd K pplinger had the idea for this book when visiting the abandoned site of the German Folk High School Falkenstein, one of the icons of the German folk high school tradition, which has been standing empty since its closure two decades ago.

As he planned a book on this topic, K pplinger came across an article about the closure of the Coolie Verner Reading Room at the University of British Columbia (Krolak, 2015). Recognizing this as another lost space of adult education, he expanded the focus of the book to include 'lost and abandoned places of adult education' in Canada. Regrettably, Canada has become home to many such lost spaces in recent years.

The work for 'Abandoned Places' builds on the editors' previous work mapping the shifts and changes in adult education as a scholarly field, a territory (Rubenson & Elfert, 2014; K pplinger, 2015) marked by both physical as well as conceptual and pedagogical spaces. The power and force of physical spaces and architecture has gained prominence in adult education literature in recent years (for example, Buiskool, et al., 2005; Stang 2010; K pplinger 2016; Kraus 2015). This paper and the book from which it is drawn, contributes to this literature, exploring the meanings of past places and spaces of adult education and the circumstances under which they have been abandoned. By abandoned places we mean physical sites or locations, which were used for adult education purposes in the past, but are no longer in existence.

In this, we engage in a culture of remembrance while resisting an idealization of the past. Many of the authors included in *Abandoned Places of Adult Education in Canada and Germany* (K pplinger & Elfert, 2018) did not personally experience the lost places they described. They see hopes and dreams not only into the future, but also into the past. Utopia is the place that does not exist, but where we would like to be. Maybe these abandoned places are interesting because they contain the potential for utopian dreams? They might

surpass our wildest imaginings of what is possible in adult education. *Abandoned Places* gathers these collective memories of the field and practice of adult education within its rich traditions of realism and transformative possibility. In this, the volume also orients us to the futures of adult education. While work on this volume progressed, it was fascinating to observe the extent to which long abandoned buildings and learning sites continued to capture the imaginations and commitments of the authors and inspired them to reflect on the lessons learned from the past that we can carry forward as legacy to the future.

This paper presents three chapters from *Abandoned Places*: The first recounts the closure of the legendary German Folk High School Falkenstein (by Bernd Käßplinger); the second describes the demise of the Coolie Verner Memorial Reading Room at the University of British Columbia (by Maren Elfert) and the third examines the loss of the Canadian National Adult Literacy Database (NALD; later COPIAN) (by Suzanne Smythe).

### **'There are Numerous Aspects Involved': The Legendary Falkenstein Folk High School in Germany**

*Bernd Käßplinger*

The concept of folk high schools originates in the seminal works of the Danish scholars Grundtvig and Kold. Folk High Schools provide education for often underprivileged learners who attend as residents for weeks or months at the school. This is distinct from schools that only operate in the day or evening. Such educational places of retreat and in distance from daily life were once common in many countries. In the United States, the Highlander Research and Education Center founded by Myles Horton followed a similar model.

The Falkenstein Folk High School, which was founded in 1959 and operated as a residence folk school until 2001, gained prominence as a place of retreat for full-time employed education staff of adult education centers. They met for three to four weeks each year with the goal to shape the spirit and joint professional identity of adult educators. Most of these educators had previously pursued university studies on very different subjects. Thus, the retreat offered the opportunity to share experiences and find common ground upon which to build adult education pedagogies and principles, informed by presentations and readings on contemporary adult education research. The Falkenstein Folk High School offered many other long-term courses for a variety of people (military, students, teachers, union members, etc.) as well as innovative international exchange and peace education programs with Israel, Tunisia, the UK, Yugoslavia, among many other countries.

From the 1970s onward, Falkenstein moved into troubled waters for a variety of reasons. First, Falkenstein was attacked by conservative forces, who considered it a “left-wing foundry” (“linke Kaderschmiede”). The election of the head of Falkenstein to the German parliament in 1969 propelled this critique since he won a constituency that had been considered a conservative safeguard. Ideological critique was reinforced in papers asking for a synthesis of political and vocational education in order to overcome the Humboldtian division between liberal and vocational education.

Another factor in the demise of the Folk High Schools had to do with physical space. Falkenstein had limited accommodation and even with government subsidy, it was difficult to host groups large enough to cover the costs of the premises. The location of the premises exacerbated this financial vulnerability. Falkenstein was located in a beautiful and desirable landscape where real estate values were increasing and where wealthy bankers and pensioners from Frankfurt were seeking to invest. Thus, in the 1990s the authorities identified a cynical “win-win-situation” by closing down Falkenstein and thus saving public subsidies and selling the premises to private investors for the construction of luxury mansions.

A third factor in the demise was philosophical differences within German adult education organizations. Not all supported the work of Falkenstein. Some members of the community perceived it as a place where young people were introduced to utopian ideas remote from practice. People educated at Falkenstein had the reputation of being ‘difficult’. They were demanding and ambitious. The austerity policies in Germany in the early 2000s reinforced competition between adult education institutions. There was hope that the proposed closure of Falkenstein in December 2001 would shield other adult education organizations from further cuts or closures and so resistance was relatively modest.

What can we learn from the closure of Falkenstein? One of the main lessons drawn from the research into Falkenstein is that rarely is there a single cause or reason for the demise of adult education institutions. There are numerous, complex aspects to consider and so those who want to prevent the closures of valued adult education spaces similarly need to adopt complex, multifaceted strategies. This involves asking difficult questions about values we may hold dear. For example, did Falkenstein become too much associated with exclusively “left-wing” political positions that excluded other voices and experiences? This suggests the need for adult educators to build alliances within our umbrella organizations, to balance different positions in order to allow for places of dialogue and bipartisan encounters in times of increasing ideological polarization. Adult educators will need to navigate this terrain if we want to preserve adult education as a public sphere for encounters and dialogue. Another issue is sound economic budgeting in times when we cannot expect unlimited resources for educational work. Locating adult education programs in prestigious and expensive sites can have a boomerang effect, since such sites might be seen as elitist by

some and also vulnerable to profit-driven considerations. These struggles for space and place mark the changing territories of adult education. Finally, the opposition to Falkenstein did not only come from outside, but there was opposition and lack of support within our own field. Instead of blaming generally nefarious external actors or neo-liberalism, the field of adult education has to critically contend with differences and sometimes a lack of solidarity within its own territory.

### **Displacement, Dilution and Demise: The History and Fate of the Coolie Verner Memorial Reading Room at the University of British Columbia**

*Maren Elfert<sup>1</sup>*

The Coolie Verner Memorial Reading Room (hereafter referred to as Reading Room) at the University of British Columbia (UBC) existed in different forms between 1961 and 2016. The Reading Room was based on the collection of books, journals, research reports, pamphlets and other ephemera initially assembled by the late Dr. Coolie Verner, head of the Department of Adult Education at the University of British Columbia from 1961 to 1977. According to former UBC adult education professor Roger Boshier (1992), “books, papers and ephemera were the highlight of Verner’s life and the day after pleading poverty or letting others pay for lunch, he would go out and spend thousands on an old map or good book” (p. 5). In the first years after his arrival in Vancouver, the “halcyon days” (p. 5) of the collection, Verner’s collection was housed in a room next to his office on the top floor of the UBC President’s House and managed by Verner himself and student volunteers as a branch of the university library. When in 1975 the adult education department moved to a different location on Toronto Road, faculty members made do with very small offices in order to accommodate Verner’s collection. This “was both a symbolic and architectural commitment to the Reading Room which, by 1975, had become our soul and identity” (Boshier, 1992, p. 6). According to Boshier, the collection was praised by visitors from around the world, including Paulo Freire, Stephen Brookfield and Malcolm Knowles (p. 7).

When Coolie Verner fell ill with cancer, he sold the collection to UBC, which committed to preserve and expand it. One year after Verner’s death, in 1980, the university held an official dedication and naming ceremony for the “Coolie Verner Memorial Reading Room,” during which a brass plaque was unveiled and a Coolie Verner Prize was brought into being that is still awarded annually to a graduate student at UBC. However, in 1982, the Reading Room – along with other reading rooms around the campus – was administratively

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to acknowledge that I have co-authored the chapter on the Coolie Verner Memorial Reading Room with Shauna Butterwick and Tom Sork. I will therefore use “we” in this section.

and financially detached from the main UBC library. Student librarians continued to manage the collection, but this detachment signaled a further distancing and isolation of the collection from the heart of the library system.

In 1994, the Department of Administrative, Adult and Higher Education and the Department of Social and Educational Studies merged into the Department of Educational Studies (EDST). The Reading Room was relocated to a much smaller and less appealing space which had two small windows and only a few chairs for sitting and browsing. Although close to all faculty offices, the Reading Room was made separate from the two central departmental buildings and most of the faculty offices and meeting rooms. The merger and move to a new location on campus marked the dilution of the autonomy of the adult education program and disconnected the Reading Room from its lifeblood, the adult education professors and students who used the materials and cared for and maintained the collection.

Eventually, and also due to budget constraints and competing priorities, the student assistant positions that were created to care for the Reading Room were re-allocated. The collection could no longer be maintained and secured and the room was locked. Adult education faculty attempted to keep the Reading Room alive by holding classes and meetings there and inviting students to research the materials for their assignments. The room was also used as office space for graduate students, but incoming students were largely unaware of its existence.

The Reading Room was further endangered in 2014 when preparations began for the impending move of EDST to a newly-constructed building. The architectural design of the new building was the subject of frequent meetings and negotiations between faculty, architects and administrators, characterized by tensions between the formulas used to determine space allocations and expectations of faculty and staff. There was no room allocated for the Reading Room in the new building. UBC reviewed Coolie Verner's will and concluded it had no responsibility for the maintenance of the materials. An Education Library report indicated that most of the holdings of the Reading Room were available in the UBC library system. This was true to some extent, but the collection contained also some historical ephemera. At least UBC Archives agreed to take the materials relevant to the US-based Commission of Professors of Adult Education and some of Verner's bound manuscripts of his research studies. During this time, the Education Library, along with other UBC libraries, were facing budget and space reductions and there was intense pressure to reduce the size of their collections.

Thereafter the collection was dispersed to the winds. A visiting scholar from India took home a large suitcase filled with books. We established contact with the Addis Ababa office of a German-based NGO, DVV International, which agreed to distribute the books to adult education programs in Ethiopia. EDST and the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong

Learning donated funds for the shipping but the container with the books sat on the docks for several months due to administrative hurdles. For a while it looked like Verner's collection would perish in a customs warehouse on the Horn of Africa. The books arrived almost exactly a year after their departure from Vancouver, on November 17, 2016.

On December 1, 2017, faculty and students held a "funeral" for the Reading Room at which Shauna Butterwick read a eulogy, the story of the Reading Room's journey from a lively hub of intellectual debate and discussion with faculty, students and international visitors, "the soul and identity" of the UBC adult education program, to a space of struggle over educational values and visions.

To illustrate his and the department's attachment to the Reading Room, Boshier (1992) drew an analogy between the collection and a wedding ring. The meaning of a wedding ring goes beyond its metal value, he wrote: "It speaks about important matters of the human spirit. As a result, wedding rings are preserved, passed down to younger generations" (p. 14). In the chapter, Shauna Butterwick, Tom Sork and I concluded with a reflection on this metaphor. We have observed in the process of the dissolution and closure of the Reading Room a disregard for institutional memory; even a disregard or distrust of physical things, artifacts, that hold our histories and memories, and that pass values to the next generation. Prior to the move into the new education building, we were repeatedly told that there was very limited space for books; that we should not bring anything from the past into the building. It is a building of a relentless present. "Not enough room" was the "statement", the "thing said" in the "procedure of exclusion" characteristic of every production of discourse (Foucault, 1981, pp. 52; 56). As we settled into this new space, it became very obvious that many offices were vacant and unassigned and that the argument that there was "no room" for the Coolie Verner Reading Room was clearly a decision that reflected the disregard for historical materials in the new futuristic physical spaces of the neoliberal university.

In our new space we are expected to leave few traces of our presence, as if we are not really there. No pictures can be hung on the hallway walls without permission. In the previous buildings, the history of adult education was displayed in numerous photographs, but these too were now in boxes. The last traces of Coolie Verner in the building, the painting of him and the brass plaque of the Coolie Verner Award winners, seem like misplaced relics from a remote past. We worry that if history and memory are not of concern anymore, the future, built on history and memory, also dies.

## **A Digital Bridge to the World: Adult Education, New Technologies and the National Adult Literacy Database**

*Suzanne Smythe*

In this third story of *'abandoned places'*, Suzanne Smythe explores another lost adult education collection, that of the NALD (the National Adult Literacy Database), and later in its life, COPIAN. NALD began its life in 1989 as a directory of adult literacy organizations in Canada. No more than a page or two, and not yet searchable, this directory was hosted by Fanshawe College in London, Ontario, using static page and filesystem designs typical of the Web 1.0. By the time NALD (renamed COPIAN in 2012) was forced to close in 2015, it had become a vibrant online, interactive, open access library, hosting one of the world's largest digital collections of adult literacy materials in Canada and internationally. Its services were bilingual and it housed one of the largest collections of indigenous adult learning materials in Canada. NALD supported over 160 literacy organizations to develop, host and maintain a web presence. 5,000,000 users accessed NALD/COPIAN's database and services annually, which were offered free of charge thanks to core funding by the Federal Government by way of the National Literacy Secretariat and later the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (NALD, 2012).

In this, NALD was much more than a database. It grew together with Canada's literacy field, creating a 'web presence' for literacy organizations so they could connect to one another to share practices. NALD employees were early innovators, experimenting with intuitive search functions to create a smooth user experience so that all literacy organizations could enjoy equitable access to research studies, curriculum materials, policy documents, project reports. At a time when large-scale literacy survey data dominated adult literacy discourse in Canada and internationally NALD made it possible to share stories, local knowledge and research of the unique learning lives of women, youth, job seekers and seniors, in large cities and small villages, in the North, and in First Nations communities, across nearly 25 years of social, economic, political and technological change in Canada.

How did this innovative project, before its time in many ways, become lost to Canada, its adult educators and its learning communities? The answers trace territories similar to those that Bernd K  pplinger and Maren Elfert have opened in their accounts of the Falkenstein Folk High School and the Coolie Verner Reading Room. NALD's fate was entangled in factors large and small, systemic and surprising, ideological and spatial.

NALD was experimental. As its first director, Charles Ramsay explained, "We didn't necessarily always know what was going to emerge from our work [...] we learned as we went about what could be possible" (personal communication, October 6, 2017). For example, NALD staff learned how to create searches using a dynamic interface that allowed



people to open a resource hyperlink embedded within a photo or image, and then add their comments about the resource for other educators. All this was a reimagining of what a database was or could be that was ahead of its time in the early 2000s.

This spirit of innovation and a capacity-building approach to literacy education was under threat by the 2000s during an ideological and policy shift toward a more narrow view of literacy as employment skills. If literacy was all about getting people back to work quickly then what was the value of literacy resource collection, or a literacy infrastructure?

Another change was in the relationship between civil servants and civil society in Canada in an emerging 'era of accountability'. In the 2000s there was a move to prevent civil servants from becoming too attached to the programs or constituencies they served. Deputy ministers began to move civil servants around, so that they could not form relationships with the people and organizations they served or become advocates for them. The consultative approach to policy and a sense of shared direction between service sectors and the government had become a thing of the past. As Hayes (2013) has written elsewhere, the relationship between government departments and civil society became more transactional and distant: "What was once an effort in community development now became transactional. You applied, we supplied" (para. 7).

There was also a renewed struggle in the mid 2000s between the Federal and Provincial governments over jurisdictional responsibility for education and social programs. This resulted in the cessation of core funding to national organizations, including NALD, regardless of the nature of their activities or their successes. When funding for NALD ended in 2014, the response from the literacy was one of shock. "This is our university and you just closed it down. Is that what you really meant to do?" (Goar, 2014, para 3). Given the anonymity and detachment that guided government relationships with community groups at the time, there was a sense that decision makers had little knowledge about the value or significance of the NALD/COPIAN infrastructure and resources. Yet in spite of the many efforts in which NALD and later COPIAN engaged to stave off the pending closure—monetizing its work to become more 'sustainable', changing its name, educating government agencies about its work, NALD/COPIAN was closed not because there was doubt about its value but because it was caught up in the policy to end core funding for national organizations.

Among its many layers and entanglements, the story of NALD suggests that infrastructure is always vulnerable, perhaps in particular those built on new technologies. The NALD/COPIAN database is now stored on the server of another literacy group that kindly offered to protect it. But as with the Coolie Verner Reading Room, libraries and online resources thrive when they are in lively, dynamic relationship to a field of practice. When resources lose their connections to human networks, their links die and their meanings fade. This is just one of the ways in which information, memories and histories can become lost in

digital realms, and speaks to the risk of relying upon digitization to preserve important records and documents, without also attending to data stewardship.

Can NALD be resuscitated, or reclaimed? It was formed in histories, doings and ideological spaces and places that cannot be replicated. But as adult educators, perhaps we can learn how to perhaps be better stewards of our collective work and our intellectual histories. We reflect on this in our conclusions.

## **Conclusion**

What might we learn from these accounts of “abandoned places of adult education”? Although our purpose is not comparative in nature, and indeed these accounts are of very different places and spaces, we nevertheless note intersections that offer new insights. Each contribution speaks to the “pendulum swings in political ideologies” (Bégin, Eggleston, & MacDonald, 2009, p. 1185) in which adult education has always been entangled. As Käßplinger describes, one of the multiple factors for the closure of the Falkenstein Folk High School was its reputation as a “left-wing foundry” (“linke Kaderschmiede”). In a similar vein, the Coolie Verner Reading Room was entangled in struggles over space that was also ideological. As we push toward a post-print society, what are legitimate uses of physical space for collections, archives and learning and who decides? NALD too struggled for visibility in a terrain of rapidly shifting funding priorities, opening questions about how literacy and other community and social movements maintain a legitimate space for action among their constituents, but also government agencies who fund them.

Each of these contributions also addressed the fragility of hard-earned infrastructure development over time. As Sue Emson, an informant in Suzanne’s study, observed: “[i]nfrastructure, particularly when it is built by and for marginalized organizations serving marginalized communities, is...fragile. Once the energy and relationships are gone, they can’t be easily replaced” (Sue Emson, cited in the Smythe chapter). Similarly, the Coolie Verner Memorial Reading Room fell victim to a “disregard for institutional memory” (Butterwick, Elfert & Sork chapter). Its infrastructure, composed of physical space, time, human ties and a shared belief in its legitimacy, crumbled with the declaration that there was “no space” in the new building for ‘so many books.’ This reminds us of the precariousness of things, even when those things are perceived as castle-like structures in the German countryside; architecture and power, the politics of space are interwoven (Käßplinger, 2016).

Perhaps building wider alliances and terrains of support could have prevented some of these losses. In order to be a relevant force in influencing changes and preventing such negative developments, the field of adult education needs to be prepared to adopt a repertoire of strategies. There were greater forces at work; austerity, a global trend to vocationalize adult education, and even forces of displacement connected to rising property

values. But blaming the powerful forces of neo-liberalism to which we might habitually cling is perhaps too simple, leaving out our own responsibilities. We have to ask ourselves critical questions without easy answers. Are we able to act wisely in solidarity within our own diverse territory?

The loss of the Falkenstein Folk High School, the Coolie Verner Memorial Reading Room, and the NALD database represents more than just the loss of adult education places, spaces or institutions. The significance of these lost spaces lies in what they tell us about our relation to the past and to the future and the precariousness of adult education identities. Without these connections to the past, we may lose our capacity for collective action and our ability to imagine and create a future.

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