

# Narrowing Interests: North American Adult Educators' Discussions on Internationalization in the 1960's

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## Narrowing Interests: North American Adult Educators' Discussions on Internationalization in the 1960's

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**Abstract:** In examining the history of the field of Adult Education, interesting questions about the development of the knowledge base emerges. This research examines the countervailing strands and how the resulting focus narrowed the field to North America interests in the 1960s.

The academic study of adult education in the United States has always been a somewhat precarious venture. At the first meeting of the Commission of Professors of Adult Education (CPAE) in 1957, Abbot Kaplan asked, "What is the content, the essential ingredient of adult education, that marks it off from other fields or disciplines?" (cited in Welton, 2013, p. 197). Welton (2013) notes that this question continues to reverberate and indeed to define the field. While the question was not resolved (at the time or really ever) it was clear to all at the time that this was the key question. In order to survive in the academy, adult education needed a unique perspective and area. However, as a professional field of practice, the area of medicine also served as a potential model, because the uniqueness would be in the area of practice rather than as a unique discipline (Welton, 2013).

As we examine the history of the field, interesting questions about the development of the knowledge base emerges. We ask, how did the knowledge base develop, and who were the important players? In this paper, we examine, what the countervailing strands were, how the resulting focus narrowed the field, and the ways that the North American field limited itself to North America interests. During the 1950s and 1960s, the Commission of Professors of Adult Education (CPAE) worked to delineate the field, in particular identifying what areas needed to be researched and what was to be considered *good research*. The CPAE's overall approach was to articulate what adult educators needed to know and how they envisioned the field. Of necessity, we also seek to understand how individuals viewed the constant tension between the

demands of their own institutions and their desire to develop the field. Ultimately, this tension resulted in a growing gap between the practice of adult education as understood in the U.S. and the academic discipline. Much of what happened in the U.S. was mirrored in Canada, where the early adult education professors were trained in U.S. institutions. In recent times, there has been an increasing isolation within U.S. professoriate and a growing distinction between U.S. and Canadian concerns, but this was not necessarily true in the early years of development.

In this paper, we examine one issue in the hopes of illuminating some of the questions mentioned above. There are similarities and differences between the U.S. development of the field and the European field. Of particular interest here is the attempt to internationalize the field in the late 1960s. This interest was initiated by a group of Canadian scholars, led by Roby Kidd. Ultimately, Kidd became disillusioned and withdrew from active participation in the Commission of Professors of Adult Education to more fully pursue this interest.

The end point for this study is 1969. In 1969, the Canadian professors of adult education began to seriously explore the need for their own organization. At a meeting in October, 1969, a small group laid out areas of concern. These included: facilitating discussions among those involved in “university level instruction in adult education in Canada (Draper, 1969);” working together to identify priorities and resources; find ways to balance teaching, research and service; convince universities that adult education is important; support part-time students; study trends; facilitate the sharing of research. One of the cautions that emerged from the minutes was a concern that interdisciplinary should not be excluded. Such an exclusion would be “folly” that would lead to “isolationism”. Additionally, they worried that the new organization should not be limited to professors (Draper, 1969).

One of the reasons that they were so concerned about this folly was the precedent being followed by their American counterparts. The American counterparts were struggling with how to develop an adult education organization that would help spur academic acceptance and convey integrity. Through the attempts the form the Commission of Professors of Adult Education (CPAE) in the late 1950's/early 1960's and the through the founding of the Adult Education Research Conference, they sought to delineate the prime areas of research in adult education; who should be members or attend meetings, and what the key US-focused concerns should be. The (CPAE) was founded in 1957, and the National Seminar for Adult Education Research (NSAER) was inaugurated in 1960. The Commission on Research, which was an invitation-only group and housed in the Adult Education Association (AEA), was another group focusing on adult education research during this time period. CPAE was a limited membership group designed to deal specifically with issues related to professors of adult education. Only those who had a half-time faculty appointment or more as an instructor in an

adult education program were eligible for membership. The NSAER, on the other hand, was for anyone (graduate students and other academics) doing research in the field. Eventually in 1970, the NSAER was re-titled the Adult Education Research Conference (AERC).

The attempts to internationalize the field were less successful. They began with J. Roby Kidd from the Ontario Institute for the Study of Education (OISE). Since there was no Canadian association of professors, and since almost all of the Canadian professors had attended graduate school in the US, they were members of the CPAE and indeed were quite active. As Welton (2013) makes clear, there was a steady stream of Americans moving the border and working in Canadian programs just forming. However, Kidd found it difficult to get any movement on this issue and eventually he gave up, throwing his efforts entirely into the Canadian Association for Adult Education (CAAE).

The key efforts considered essential in the development of a field of adult education revolved around organization membership; shifting focus from practice to research; and ultimately in the US a tension between those who were interested in the development of a worldwide adult education movement and those who considered this antithetical to the first two efforts mentioned above.

We hope that this research will stimulate cross-cultural dialogue. Our aim is to understand how the academic discipline developed and where the primary areas of contention were. We hope that with this paper, we can begin to properly assess the ways that this academic field as changed (or has remained unchanged) over time.

## References

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