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# **It's Been the Best of Times: My Twenty-Year Retrospective on Adult Education**

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Abstract: This essay presents a personal assessment of the ways in which the field of Adult and Continuing Education has succeeded and faltered during the last two decades and discusses how the field can address future challenges.

## **A Critical Reflection on Two Decades in the Adult Education**

When I was asked to a part of the Opening Panel at the 2015 Adult Education Research Conference (AERC) and to reflect on how the field of Adult and Continuing Education has changed during my career, I was taken aback. I found the invitation intimidating for I knew instantly that this would not be the safety of a journal article, where I could support my controversial opinions by hiding behind citations and dragging in others' opinions in an attempt to lessen the harshness of my critique. Also, I understood that since I would have to also read my essay as part of the Opening Panel, that more than likely, I would not be able to stifle my emotions with cleverly worded phrases that I might have put into a book chapter. Unfortunately, when I have to stand and deliver, I can't hide my emotions. So here's the truth: I am 20 years into my career as an adult educator, and I constantly vacillate between loving Adult Education and being fearful for the future of our field.

Let me declare unequivocally that I am proud to be a part of Adult Education because this field has been a great liberal and progressive force that gave the world ideas like transformative learning and yes, even andragogy. I am so very honored that we can claim scholars and activists like Septima Clarke, Paulo Freire, Jack Mezirow, and Dorothy Canfield Fisher. Adult Education has influenced and given voice to and nurtured great social movements, such as the Civil Rights Movement and the Labor Movement, which changed the face of our American society. These historical social movements made it possible for me, a Black women, to be a professor and to be able to offer my humble reflections in this paper. Indeed it was this legacy that first attracted me to Adult Education. The other reason that I am fortunate enough to be an adult educator is the people who were my professors and mentors when I first started my formal schooling to become credentialed in Adult Education. Ron Cervero (Cervero & Wilson, 1996) was writing about the importance of stakeholders to the program planning process. Tom Valentine (Valentine & Darkenwald, 1990) was revolutionizing the way we think about literacy and regard literacy program participants, and Scipio A.J. Colin, III (1989) was schooling the field on the historical legacy of African American adult educators and how we should conceptualize race and racism in Adult Education. These guiding forces in my life were holdovers from the activist reformers of the 1970s who wanted to expand the access of our field to include disparate voices like mine.

But now, twenty years later, at times, I am frightened for us as a field because I don't recognize our values and principles in our programs. On the occasions when I visit universities to perform program reviews, I notice that courses like *History and Philosophy*, *Social Context of Adult Education*, *Critical Reflection*, *Program Planning*, and *Adult Development* are being replaced with offerings called *Learning Design*, *Consulting*, *Creating a Learning Infrastructure*, and *Facilitating Change*. I'm wary because I'll talk to students at national

conferences and suggest readings and concepts that I think are foundational to Adult Education and what I'm saying is clearly new to these students. During the last few years I've met Adult Education master's and doctoral students who were unfamiliar with Highlander, Myles Horton, and Malcolm Knowles, and didn't understand why I thought Literacy was part of Adult Education. I've even spoken with an Adult Education professor who had a Ph.D. in the field and did not know or think that Extension was any part of Adult Education. I am alarmed because when we allow our foundation to be altered, forgotten, and neglected, we lose the essence of what makes us great.

Twenty years ago when I entered the field, we were about democratization of the citizenry, expanding educational access, and social justice. We were struggling to "give voice" (Sheared, 1996) and to make a difference. Yet, there are time now when I don't recognize Adult Education. Sometimes I feel disconnected and loss, as my beloved Adult Education changes and I seem to be left behind, unwilling to or unable to adjust.

However, before I descend into a complete process of digressing into oblivion, let me reframe the question that I was asked to answer as part of the Opening Panel: how has the field of adult and continuing education changed during your career? Rather than answer that question, I am in its place setting forth three separate questions: what is the field of Adult and Continuing Education doing right; where is the field of Adult and Continuing Education faltering is; and what do I hope for as the future of Adult and Continuing Education.

***What Is the Field of Adult of Adult and Continuing Education Doing Right?*** First and foremost, I am heartened every time I come to the Adult Education Research Conference. Since the inception of Adult Education as an academic discipline in the early 1920s, the field has set forth as a primary mission an essential desire to help adults, especially those lacking basic skills succeed through education and the field has worked to speak truth to power (Cunningham 1988). When I attended my first AERC in 1993, it was to present at the African Diaspora Preconference at Penn State. Since that time I have seen the African Diaspora Preconference endure and its organizers work to make space for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer & Allies (LGBTQ&A) Pre-conference. This action led directly to making space and broadening the horizons for other disenfranchised groups to have a place at the table.

Additionally, the scholarly presentations at AERC always make me aware that the flame of our social justice core still burns in the papers on topics like sustainability, globalization, power dynamics in the Adult Education classroom, and race and transnational education. Moreover, our major texts, such as the *Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education* (Kasworm, Rose, and Ross-Gordon, 2010) and the *Handbook on Transformational Learning: Theory, Research, and Practice* (Taylor & Cranton, 2012), represent us well in providing cutting edge analysis of the field's theory, research, and practices. Finally, the field's elite measure of acceptance, refereed journals, have shown a significant increase over the last twenty years in articles that can be classified as directly related to ethnic and racial concerns, gender, sexuality, and economic justice. One of the earliest articles, on race, *Cultural Literacy: Ethnocentrism Versus Self-Ethnic Reflectors*, by Scipio A. J. Colin, III (1989) appeared in *Thresholds in Education* as early as 1989, and simultaneously signaled and encouraged a critical assessment of Adult Education's hegemonic perspective on 'otherness.

***Where Is the Field of Adult and Continuing Education Faltering?*** In my opinion, the answer to this question lies partially with a changing academic landscape that devalues classroom

facilitation and champions the economic advantages of a business model of adjunct professors, instructors, and lecturers in massive on-line classes. We are also faltering in part because of our inadequate response by changing our core in an attempt to increase our market value.

Yes, of course we must change and adapt in order to survive. However, the worth that we bring has lasted for over seven decades and it is found in our core principles. It undergirds our curriculum that: employs interdisciplinary perspectives; recognizes the importance of reflexivity/reflective practice; encourages collaborative inquiry; values experiential ways of knowing/doing; stipulates the significance of social context; and celebrates and continues to encourage engagement in social justice projects/movements.

***What Do I Hope For As the Future of Adult and Continuing Education?*** This is the easiest question to answer. I hope for us to draw on our collective greatness and remember who we are: we are Paulo Freire; we are Phyllis Cunningham; we are Myles Horton; we are Septima Clark. And let us never forget that they are us and we are a great community with many roads left to make by walking.

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