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## Opening panel: Adult education then and now

Michael Newman

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## **Opening panel: Adult education then and now**

Michael Newman

Keywords: adult education, specialisation, paradox

**Abstract:** This is not so much a paper as four quotations from the author's previous writings, along with some annotations. The author describes his first encounter with adult education. He looks at one of the reasons why adult education was robust. He describes the onset of professionalism. He describes the effects of specialisation. And he identifies the paradoxical situation adult education finds itself in today

### **First encounter**

I published the following in 2013, but the events took place nearly five decades ago:

I was in England in the 1960s, and needed a job. I had done a stint of teaching English as a second language, and so I wrote offering my services to a number of educational institutions listed in a local government guide. I got a reply from an inner city adult education institute, offering me a class on Tuesday evenings called "Writing for pleasure" (not English as a second language at all). I accepted, and turned up at the appointed time at the address given in the letter—a secondary school by day and a branch of the adult education institute by night. Someone called a tutor-in-charge showed me to a classroom where sixteen people sat patiently waiting. I had prepared nothing and am not sure how I survived, but I did, and we established a pattern of activities—critiquing our writings and swapping tips—that took us through the thirty-odd weekly meetings that made up the year.

All the classes met from 7.00 to 9.00 and, this being England, at ten minutes to eight everyone went to the school canteen for a cup of tea. The canteen was large, and there were some 200 people from all but the most exalted social strata, wearing office and casual clothes, leotards (keep fit), the odd velvet jacket and string of multi-coloured beads (the 1960s, remember), overalls (car maintenance), and whites (badminton for beginners). The sight of the canteen thrilled me. All these people were ready to come to an unprepossessing school building in order to learn. And I was quickly captivated by what went on in my classroom. I loved the buzz and the hum of it. I loved the smiles, and the frowns of concentration, and the unpressured, thoughtful conversation.

### **Sink or swim**

I wrote this in a book published in 1979:

Adult education is a cruel test of a tutor's skill. It is a sink or swim business. If the tutor does not have what it takes, people stop coming. The students vote with their feet, unobtrusively transferring to other classes or simply staying away. It is an unpleasant experience. The class dwindles week by week, leaving the tutor all too aware that she or he has been found wanting, until the centre closes the class down. A professional teacher from another sector who has taught captive students for years to her or his superiors' complete satisfaction may find this one brief attempt to teach an adult education class a horrible moment of truth. ... Obviously adult education centres do try to provide support in the form of induction courses, in-service training and advice, but the poor cousin normally does not have enough full-time staff to guide new tutors carefully through their first meetings. In the vast majority of cases they are given a few general hints, patted on the back and then shoved in front of the class. Some sink.

Hardly the optimum way of doing things but it did mean that the teachers who survived were good, and adult education as a whole was robust.

### **Amateur/professional**

I was attracted to the amateur feel of adult education. I wrote this in the introduction to my 1979 book:

There is a move amongst some adult educators to “professionalise” the service. There is much talk about training in order to rid the service of its “amateur” image. There are even some who suggest that adult education should not employ tutors unless they are teacher-trained. These adult educators may find much in this book to disagree with ...

“Amateur”, of course, does not necessarily imply poor quality. It also means “lover”. I was worried that the people who loved adult education would be gradually sidelined.

### **Specialisation**

In the last quarter of last century, specialisation changed adult education, blurred its image, and reduced its influence. We can see this in the formation of professional associations. Once upon a time there was just an association of adult education, then the literacy and numeracy people broke away and now there were two associations. Then the teachers of English as a second language followed suit. Then the continuing education people began agitating for a separate conference, and an association with higher rather than adult education. The human resource people left ...

Splits occurred along theoretical lines. People enthusiastic about transformative learning created their own conference. People interested in education for social change formed their own virtual network. People interested in workplace, work-based and competency-based learning seemed to create a separate and exclusive literature ...

### **A paradox**

I published this last year, and it is about the here and now:

Those of us with a passion for adult education are living through paradoxical times. Adult education is everywhere, provided by government departments concerned with land care, road safety, health, ageing, transport, communications, you name it, in land rights and reconciliation programs, in book discussion groups, political parties, prisons, on activist websites like Avaaz, in the workplace, in trade unions and employers' associations, in friends of a hospital, friends of an art gallery, friends of a zoo, in gyms and on sportsfields, in doctors' surgeries, pre-natal clinics, in the corners of coffee shops, in gardens and national parks, on the net, on the net, on the net, in cancer support groups, on the streets of Montreal, Madrid, London, Bangkok, Paris ... And a lot of this adult education is no longer voluntary. We need to go on learning throughout our adult lives. We enter new jobs, join new organizations, buy new bits of technology, and maintain our edge (or our licence to practise) in our profession by continually updating our knowledge and honing our skills.

This proliferation of adult education needs inventive adult educators to bring good practice and new insights to all of its forms. Yet amidst such a wealth of adult education, the institutions that promote adult education and the theories that inform it are in decline. At universities, the study of adult education (and much else) has lost out to the obsession with business studies. In the world of leisure, the practice of adult education is losing out to the mind-dulling vacuity of social media and the instant gratification of the internet.

Can we find a way out of this paradox? Can we make a start at this conference? Can we share the hum?

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