

Introduction

Adult Education and Post-Secondary Institutions: An Introduction to the Special Issue

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Welcome to this special issue of the *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, which explores the relationship between adult education and post-secondary institutions. The writings that appear in this publication represent a broad survey of current research, innovative projects, and diverse perspectives from academic and non-academic based researchers. The special issue is also intended to reflect the presence of the field of adult education in the teaching, research, and community service activities of post-secondary institutions. In this introduction we provide a brief overview of the field and practice of adult education and its connections to higher education institutions. We also highlight some of the themes that the reader could expect from the articles.

In a time when many faculties and colleges of education continue to change, the presence of adult education as a formal program of study has decreased in size and scope in several universities. At the same time, several principles traditionally associated with adult education and adult learning have been embraced across different disciplines in post-secondary institutions. As a result, adult education and adult learning are being used interchangeably, when in fact they are quite different topics of study. One of the outcomes has been, paradoxically, both a strengthening and a weakening of the field. This dynamic has prompted some people to wonder whether adult education can be referred to as a field of study any longer, and raises questions about the scope and boundaries of adult education. Interestingly enough, the traditional definition of UNESCO (1976) is rather comprehensive and includes post-secondary education:

Adult education refers to the entire body of organized educational processes, whatever the content, level and method, whether formal or otherwise, whether they prolong or replace initial education in schools, colleges and universities as well as in apprenticeship, whereby persons regarded as adults by the society to which they belong develop their abilities, enrich their knowledge, improve their technical or professional qualifications or turn them in a new direction and bring about changes in their attitudes or behavior in the twofold perspective of full personal development and participation in balanced and independent social, economic and cultural development. (p. 2)

The twofold perspective mentioned in the UNESCO definition calls our attention to the different purposes of adult education. One perspective views adult education as an instrumental

project with a vocational orientation. In this thread the focus is placed on individual development and learning in order to better prepare the labour force for transitions or reintegration into the market. A second perspective views adult education in the context of meaningful participation in social, economic, and cultural development, and has a focus on the role of adult education in promoting more democratic and sustainable societies. This view also argues that, in helping to build a new society devoid of oppressive structures and dynamics, adult education can serve an emancipatory purpose. A third view proposes that adult education should promote simultaneously individual development and social change. Over time, the distinctions between foci and sites of learning have become blurred, and eventually the different perspectives on adult education have been expressed in post-secondary programs. Furthermore, the contested nature of adult education has become part and parcel of academic discourse. This discourse has helped redefine adult education as a field rather than a disparate set of practices.

In the last few decades, adult education in post-secondary settings has flourished. Access to different disciplines and research opportunities has resulted in groundbreaking work from scholars and practitioners who have made significant theoretical and practical contributions across all sectors of society. Actors in the field have responded by providing localized learning opportunities that were normally part of formal post-secondary programs. Initiatives have included strengthening local communities facing increasing neoliberal intrusions, critical approaches to workplace learning, and enhancing lifelong learning across different populations. These initiatives have improved the capacity of traditional higher education institutions to engage more actively with the surrounding social reality and helped faculty and students to better explain social dynamics. They have also made possible for scholars to engage in participatory action research projects that promote collaborative efforts between universities and communities. Arguably, successes have often occurred when it was recognized that adult education is grounded in real life issues and concerns. Canada has a long tradition in this regard that can be traced at least to the first part of the 20th century. Two examples from that period can illustrate this tradition. The first can be found in the Extension Department of the University of Alberta in the 1920s, directed by Ned Corbett, which had its own radio station and eventually led to the creation of the Canadian Association for Adult Education in the early 1930s, and the Farm Radio Forum, and the Citizens Forum in the early 1940s. The second example can be found in the creation of the Extension Department at St. Francis Xavier University in the late 1920s. Led by Moses Coady, this department undertook a variety of innovative projects to ignite community action and social change by combining the principles of adult education and cooperativism. In the decades that followed, many initiatives and programs around the world have continued and deepened those pioneering efforts to connect universities and adult education

This Issue

This special issue on adult education and post-secondary institutions includes a series of texts that discuss emerging research, theories, and practices in the field. Among the themes included in this issue are the following:

- the emancipatory nature of adult education;
- institutional efforts to scale up justice-oriented activities through lifelong learning opportunities;

- knowledge construction for broad social reform within the context of institutional missions as well as access to learning opportunities that reflect principles of adult learning in pedagogical practices;
- emerging research directions on the internationalization of higher education, and
- options for alternative career pathways of adult learners.

This special issue is comprised of six full-length articles, five shorter pieces (issues and perspectives) and three book reviews. We now provide a brief overview of each of the articles.

Full-length Articles

In the first full-length article, “Community-Supported Learning: Practicums, Adult Education and Post-Secondary Institutions,” Sumner uses the triple lens of social, experiential, and workplace learning to explore the potential of practicums to combine the resources of the academy with the opportunities of the wider world and to enable community-supported learning. She illustrates her argument with a case study from a Canadian university. In the second article, “Directions for 21st Century Lifelong Learning Institutes: Elucidating Questions from Osher Lifelong Learning Institute Studies,” Talmage, Hansen, Knopf, and Thaxton argue that there is a dearth of research literature on lifelong learning institutions that focus on older adults. To address this vacuum, they examine fifty-five articles dealing with this topic, and propose a series of thematic areas for future research and practice.

In the third article, “Using the 3E Framework in Promoting Adult Learners’ Success in Online Environments,” Squires argues that in order to facilitate the success of adult learners in online environments, instructors must consider the learning characteristics of adult learners and intentionally design courses that leverage their strengths while addressing their challenges. In this conceptual paper, she proposes and applies a framework to examine e-learning technologies and highlights the implications of this approach. In the fourth article, “Career Decisions of Recent First-generation Postsecondary Graduates at a Metropolitan Region in Canada: A Social Cognitive Career Theory Approach,” Dos Santos analyzes the career perspectives of first-generation, post-secondary graduates and the impact of those perspectives on decisions and pathways.

The fifth article, “Local to Global Justice: Roles of Student Activism in Higher Education, Leadership Development, and Community Engagement” by Farago, Swadener, Richter, Eversman, and Roca-Servat examines the impact that an annual social justice forum hosted by a university has on students’ academic experiences, career and professional development, leadership development, and community engagement. Findings suggest that participation in the organization of the annual event about local and global justice struggles enriched students’ educational experiences within and beyond the university. In the last article of this section, “Connecting Transculturalism with Transformative Learning: Toward a New Horizon of Adult Education,” Jurkova and Guo argue that the impact of transnational migration has reconfigured social and public identities and propose the theoretical framework of transculturalism—in connection with theories of transformative learning—to understand the changing nature of adult education.

Short Pieces: Issues and Perspectives

This section includes five short perspective pieces. In the first one, entitled “Undergraduate Adult Education in the Contemporary Neoliberal University,” Grace and English argue that undergraduate adult education programs must respond to changing student profiles and needs, institutional requirements, marketplace and workplace demands, and emerging technologies. Given that students in these programs tend to be non-traditional learners who are usually older and employed, the authors call for more flexible admission requirements such as prior learning assessment.

In the second piece, “The University of Buenos Aires’ Programa Facultad Abierta: Reflections on a Collaborative and Political–Academic University Extension Initiative with Argentina’s Self-Managed Workers,” Ruggeri, Antivero, Polti, and Vieta describe the development of a university extension program that emerged in the context of Argentina’s 2001 economic and political crisis. The authors contend that this experience shows that the public university has a key role in an academic–political project which co-creates knowledge and collaborates with marginalized communities and working people in forging alternative socio-economic realities.

In the third piece, “Internationalization of Higher Education: Considerations for Adult Education,” Xiao examines the impact of the internationalization of higher education on adult education, looking at both challenges and opportunities. The author also calls for more concerted efforts on student mobility, internationalizing curricula for intercultural understanding, and enhancing international collaboration. The fourth short paper, “Adult Education in the Post-Secondary Context: Sustainability in the 21st Century” by Kolenick, uses the recent creation of the United Nations University’s Regional Centres of Expertise (RCEs) as an example of how adult education initiatives in post-secondary institutions can continue to serve the public interest in the 21st century. In the last paper of this section, “Peer Coaching in a Research-Based Teachers’ Professional Learning Method for Lifelong Learning: A Perspective,” Gutierrez and Kim examine teacher professional development from the perspective of professional learning communities (PLC) composed by teachers, researchers, and policy makers. They contend that PLCs promote collective efficacy, community, and collaborative experiential learning through experimentation and reflection on emerging practices.

Finally, the three book reviews provide a sampling of the varied nature of adult education and community development in different contexts. The topics of these books range from disrupting adult and community education, to analyzing issues of oppression and resistance in higher and adult education, to the creation of courses for adults.

Concluding Remarks

We would like to close this introduction by acknowledging that the genesis of this special issue came from a colleague who passed away far too early. We want to acknowledge the passion and dedication of Dr. Donna Chovanec to strengthening the field of adult education. Donna wanted to use a special issue as a vehicle to highlight adult education in higher education. This special issue is dedicated to Donna as it reflects both her commitment to the field and the breadth of debate that she was regularly engaged in. She is missed, but her legacy lives on in many places, including the pages of this special issue.

References

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