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### Recommended Citation

Jarvis, Peter; Holford, John; and Griffin, Colin (2000). "Problems of Mapping the Field of Education for Adults through the Literature," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2000/roundtables/18>

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# Problems of Mapping the Field of Education for Adults through the Literature

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**Abstract:** *The education of adults is a modernity project and as we come to the end of the era, adult education, as we knew it, has been transformed into lifelong learning. We are producing a 5 volume set of books reflecting significant contributions to the field in the English language throughout the era. In this discussion paper we highlight and illustrate some of the problems of this on-going project.*

## Using the Expertise of Scholars in the Field

The project began with a grounded theory approach about the nature of the field. Over 200 hundred scholars were approached with a brief request, asking them to tell us what they thought were the most influential works in the field of adult education: non-vocational and vocational, works about the processes of teaching and learning and works from the perspectives of the academic disciplines. While there were 70 responses, the spread of suggestions seemed skewed. It was clear that some areas of adult education were not being recorded at all. Consequently, a grounded theory approach both to the demarcation of the field and to its influential publications was abandoned. It was recognised that the nature of the field is contestable.

## The Nature of the Field of Education for Adults

Questions about mapping the field began to be raised in the United States very early, e.g. by Knowles, as editor of the *1960 Handbook of Adult Education in the United States* and has continued to Apps (1989). The problem is also implicit in the large encyclopaedias, such as Titmus (1989) and Tuijnman, (1996). Houle's (1992) bibliographic essay is perhaps the most far ranging attempt in which he examined 1,241 books, but no other forms of publication.

Edwards (1997) explored this question under the heading "Boundaries, field and moorland," using the concept of de-differentiation, illustrating that even the emerging boundaries were being blurred. This is a process about which Bucher and Strauss (1966, p.187) also wrote: "While specialities organize around unique missions, as time goes on segmental missions may develop within the fold." However, it is debatable whether education for adults actually began with a single original mission.

Indeed, it is increasingly being recognised that in late modern society there is both a growth and fragmentation of the original field and, at the same time, new modes of teaching and learning are occurring. Consequently, any construction of the field is a representation of a rapidly changing reality that, even if it is accurate, will not reflect the field at a time other than the one when it was constructed.

We have attempted to demarcate some of the segments within each of these broad categories and then attempted to trace back the literature in that segment until we reach the time that it was part of the original mission(s) of education for adults. Having undertaken this process, we are seeking to include within the publication representations from each of the segments at different stages of their development. The segments, however, can be categorized for the purposes of publication within a broader framework of general and liberal education for adults/lifelong education; vocational education; processes in education and learning; perspectives upon the fields from the academic disciplines.

## Problems in the Project

Even accepting that the map that we have drawn is our own representation of the field, there are a multitude of other problems in mapping it through the literature; here we note a few of those which have confronted us.

- It is not always self-evident where to locate a piece of writing. For example, in some instances a piece about workers' education can be classified as either vocational or non-vocational education or even as a piece of academic research.
- As we trace the literature backwards, there is a convergence in the segments so that we may actually give it a different interpretation to the author and therefore locate it within a field that the author would not recognize.

- We do not know all the literature and, consequently, if we select one piece as representative of what we are seeking to record, there may be others that we do not know that is even more representative.
- The literature in our field is not only academic, there may be more influential pieces in policy statements or legislation, and while we have included some of these, it is not possible to have a comprehensive coverage.

### Conclusion

Despite the fact that we can find references to the education of adults that go back many hundreds of years, it is a relatively young field of academic study; the first PhD only being awarded in 1925 (Yeaxlee, 1925). Because the field has fragmented so rapidly in recent years, many of the areas are not studied widely and do not constitute subjects taught to students, and those which are tend to be for pragmatic reasons rather than academic ones. Consequently, this project seeks to explore uncharted territory and highlight some of the major developments that have occurred during the period known as Modernity - but it remains a very subjective representation of the development, fragmentation and metamorphosis of adult education into lifelong learning.

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