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Serving the World or Building a Profession: The Confounding Dilemmas of Mid-Twentieth Century Academic Adult Education

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Abstract: This historical study examines the early years of the academic profession of adult education. It analyzes the ways that professors thought about the field and discusses the ways that differing emphases were adopted and/or discarded.

Keywords: history, professoriate, professionalization, AERC

The twentieth century saw both an enormous growth and a troubling contraction within the academic field of adult education. Although, we do not aim to dissect the reasons for this, our goal for this paper is to begin a discussion of the vicissitudes of the field and the way that its history is constantly being replayed.

Adult education in the U.S. and Canada was birthed in varying social change movements in the period between the two World Wars, and the post-War period moved the focus from social change to professionalism and academic rigor (e.g. see Grace, 2012). The founding of the Commission of Professors of Adult Education (CPAE) is part of this professionalizing effort, yet there has been little understanding of its role in the development of academic Adult Education. In order to understand this history, we are undertaking a study of the development of the academic field of adult education.

As far back as 1956, Burton Clark contended that adult education lacked a coherent mission in its practice. In April 1961, Glenn Jensen, then Executive Director of the Adult Education Association (AEA) in the United States, released what he termed as “A Thoughtful Report” highlighting the achievements of the AEA since it began in 1950, as well as the roadblocks encountered by the organization and the field of Adult Education. Some of the roadblocks discussed by Jensen included the “lip service” given to adult education programs by public school and university administrations, who in his view, failed to give them the kind of support and recognition given to similar programs in other countries around the world, resulting in the lack of “a national perception or image of adult education” (Jensen, 1961, p. 1). He further contended that the AEA had failed to unite programs with a common goal or cause. Over the years, the issues raised by Jensen and Clark have repeatedly been examined by professors of adult education. Indeed, Quigley, in a 1994 report summarizing panel discussions concerning academic adult education programs at the annual CPAE gathering, contended that the academic community “has looked upon Adult Education as a ‘newcomer’ since its first appearance on the university campus in the 1930’s” (p. 2). In more recent years, discussions by professors at annual CPAE meetings have centered around how these issues may lead to the closure of Adult Education graduate program closures (i.e. Cornell University, National-Louis University), pointing to continued lack of understandings of Adult Education programs and the field itself by administrators and others that Jensen alluded to in 1961.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the development and growth of an adult education professoriate and adult education programs in higher education in the 1950s and 1960s as well as to examine the development of the CPAE in the late 1950s. In examining the early years of the CPAE, we are interested in several interrelated questions: What was the purpose (or multiple

purposes) in founding the CPAE? How did the group envision the role of the professors in the broader field? Additionally, we hope to shed light on the development of academic adult education, the ways that it fits into the university and the tensions both in the early years and at present. For the purposes of this inquiry, we will specifically examine the roles of and the interplay among political concerns; individuals' decisions; and differing conceptions of the field of adult education. Yet, in examining the archival and printed materials, there is a consistent recognition of the difficulties inherent in formulating a new field of study and constant concern about the state of the research in adult education. There were also steady calls to set up boundaries and obstacles to membership in the academic profession as an attempt to more fully define and limit membership. Ultimately, we have been struck by the fact that while constantly bemoaning the marginal nature of the field, the professors also attempted to put themselves at the center of discussion while marginalizing the input of others who also might have had a stake in how the academic field of adult education was developed. This marginalization process was very much part of the discussion then and now. This research illuminates on the ways the academic field of adult education has changed (or remained unchanged) over time. We consulted archives at Syracuse University as well as contemporaneous articles and books, for sources for our discussion.

Developing Profession

American adult education began its movement into the university in the 1920s, although "official" programs and degrees in adult education did not begin until the 1930s. By the 1950s, there were 29 graduate programs, and by the end of 1960, at least 250 adult education doctoral degrees had been awarded (Houle, 1961). Adult education has followed something of the same trajectory as the field of education in general. Clifford and Guthrie (1988) divide the history of professional schools of education into two categories: formative (1900-1940) and mature (1955-1985). They go on to note that the study of education is highly politicized and constantly being redefined.

Maher (2003) views this differently and classifies adult education professors by generation. The first generation (1920-1940s) developed the early literature and founded the first professional organization, although their backgrounds were not in adult education. The second generation is what she calls the forefathers. This group came out of the first graduate programs of the 1930s but were active in the 1950s. They created the Commission of Professors of Adult Education (CPAE). The third generation was active in the 1960s, and they were primarily the graduate students of the second generation. They helped expand the professoriate and the CPAE. Finally, the fourth generation was active starting in the 1970s and continued the expansion. While Maher provides some interesting background, in our view we do not learn a lot about the development of the field from simply categorizing generations, as it distorts the deep divisions and disagreements among the participants to simply look at these groups generationally. Instead, we examine the ways that adult education developed as a field and as a discipline of study.

Adult Education Graduate Programs. Adult education began its movement into the university graduate programs in the 1920s, and by 1960 at least 250 adult education doctoral degrees had been awarded by (Houle, 1961). It was not until the 1950's, however, that attempts were made to develop adult education as an academic discipline. This occurred as the field itself was consolidating through the development of several organizations focused on differing aspects of adult education. The U.S. professors of adult education were affiliated the Adult Education Association of the U.S.A. (AEA). The AEA was founded in 1951 as the result of a merger

between the American Association for Adult Education (AAE) and the Department of Adult Education of the National Education Association (NEA). The new organization was envisioned as stronger than the two previous associations. The actual work of this new organization was to focus on consulting, field services, in-service education and publications. At this time, the new organization did not have a separate research division. But by 1952 the new association developed a set of priorities. These included a grant from the Fund for Adult Education (FAE) that had a significant research component, both actual research and syntheses of research. There was discussion about how much to emphasize research in this proposal (Bradford, 1952, p.2). In addition, the FAE funded development of an evaluation model and an effort to advance the training of adult educators.

In the 1950's and 1960's, several steps were taken to improve the teaching of adult education in university settings. Most researchers point to the publication of the so-called "Black Book" in 1964 (Jensen, Liveright & Hallenbeck) as part of the general effort to enhance graduate study and research. However, they overlook two of the most important events, which were the founding of the Commission of Professors of Adult Education (CPAE) in 1957, the inauguration of research conferences, and developing what later came to be the Adult Education Research Conference (AERC) in 1960.

Commission of Professors of Adult Education (CPAE). The CPAE was founded in 1957 to provide a common space for the small group of AE professors to meet and discuss the issues specific to teaching in doctoral programs. The founding was preceded by a 1955 meeting that came to be known as the Allerton Park meeting. Nine individuals were present at this meeting, representing nine graduate programs (Whipple, 1957). Three issues of organizational structure are important in understanding the thinking of the professoriate. The first was membership or who was allowed to be a member of the organization. The second was building a curriculum for graduate study and the place of graduate adult education in within universities. And finally, the third dealt with efforts to build the research base and theory building. In April 1957 the first meeting of the Professors of Adult Education took place in Ann Arbor, Michigan, the first of five annual meetings that Kellogg agreed to fund (London, 1961, p.4)

CPAE membership was initially limited to those who taught or researched (at least half time) in institutions that offered doctoral programs, but in 1966 this was amended to too add those teaching and researching in master's only programs. Both the membership and the meetings were closed to outsiders. However, there was no consensus on this issue, and it was a source of unending debate.

A synopsis of the first five years, indicated that the topics of discussion at CPAE meetings focused on the curriculum and on graduate study in general. These included: a survey of graduate programs; a study of doctorates; career patterns of professors of adult education; academic training programs; examination of the problems and interests of professors of adult education; and the nature of adult education as a field of operations and as a practical discipline. Other areas discussed focused on the nature of the adult learner; philosophy; and the community (London, 1961). This led to two publications, the second of which became what is known as the Black Book (Jensen, Liveright & Hallenbeck, 1964).

From the beginning of CPAE, the professors were concerned with the parameters of graduate programs. In summarizing the discussions at Allerton Park, Whipple (1957) noted that, "In general the Professors were asking for answers to such basic questions as WHO, WHAT, WHY, and HOW; beyond that they were plagued by the ubiquitous question of status and the

relationship of the Professor of Adult Education to the rest of the university” (p.iv, capitalization in the original).

Finally, the founding of the CPAE led to a renewed effort to improve research findings and methodologies. The professors viewed their research roles as framers and synthesizers of research, and that they would develop the future of the field of adult education through their work with graduate students. However, they were also well aware that as professors they also had to pay attention to their on-campus duties, their campus cultures, and their need to gain tenure and promotion. While the early meetings of the CPAE focused primarily on graduate study, one constant theme was the importance of research and the need to enhance the research being conducted (London, 1961).

Commission on Research. The Commission on Research, which was housed in the AEA, came about because of increasing dissatisfaction with the old Research Section of the AEA. In 1962, Wilson Thiede, viewed the limitations of the AEA in conducting research were because the members of AEA primarily consumed, not conducted, research. Out of these concerns, the Commission on Research was developed. Its function was to publish or encourage publication of articles in AEA-USA publications, *Adult Leadership* and *Adult Education*, to encourage the application of research findings, and, as well, encourage “appropriate” presentations of research at annual meetings. They also hoped to support the publication of yearbooks. Finally, they wanted to serve as a liaison for the AEA-USA and research groups, such as the American Educational Research Association. As with the CPAE, the Commission on Research membership was by invitation and limited to professors.

Research Conferences. By 1964, the CPAE was ready to extend its mission and discussed the “next steps of cooperatively planning, obtaining support for, and conducting adult education research as a means of more rapid developing the knowledge and practice of the field (Jensen, March 11, 1964). In the professors’ discussions, the first question to emerge was, “what is research in adult education?” Additionally, they asked “does adult education research have specific and unique methods or is it more a question of adaptation of other methods?” Finally, they also asked “who should do adult education research and what should the relationships among researchers focused on adult education be”?

As the CPAE worked on various research projects, the idea was put forward for a new conference devoted solely to research. This led to several efforts to establish research conferences and research groups. These included: The National Seminar on Adult Education Research (NSAER), and by 1970, the Adult Education Research Conference (AERC), and the AEA’s Commission on Research. Only AERC is still currently functioning as an annual research conference.

The National Seminar on Adult Education Research (NSAER) was inaugurated in 1960 (Knox, 2016). The National Seminar mirrored CPAE in addressing the twin concerns of research and the nature of the field, and the purpose of the annual NSAER meeting “was to provide an opportunity for the persons most actively engaged in adult education research to meet together to: discuss central issues in adult education research; test research ideas of individual members against a group of knowledgeable and interested peers; report on recent individual research findings in a setting allowing extensive and thoughtful discussion; stimulate the development of research in adult education; encourage the use of adult educators of research findings; cooperate on research projects; identify implications of education research generally for adult education” (Knox, 1962). More recently, Knox (2016) described the goal of the NSAER as a means for doctoral students and others conducting research in adult education to collaborate and discuss

their work with others, as at the time CPAE was a closed group. Moreover, since at the time CPAE members were focused on producing a curriculum model for graduate programs and writing the Black Book (Knox, 2016), they were neither supporting research nor providing opportunities for novice researchers. By 1962, the NSAER had met twice and had received funding from the Center for the Study of Liberal Education for Adults (CSLEA).

By 1968 concerns were growing among adult educators about the best type of research organizations and conferences to promote both researched studies in adult education and the research process. Tough, as newly elected chair of the NSAER, detailed his recommendations, first, that the conference support networking and learning about research so that attendees could learn about “current pioneering research and theory-building in adult education” (Tough, 1969). He advocated accepting papers that would contribute “new knowledge that will stimulate further research or have some impact on theory.” He also agreed that the NSAER should maintain close relationships with other research organizations, such as the AERA, meet annually at the same time and place as AERA, and consider becoming a special interest group of AERA, although he recognized the complications and loss of control that might result in becoming affiliated with the group. He further suggested that closer connections be sought with the Canadian Association for Adult Education (CAAE). Finally, he suggested that the name of the NSAER be changed to be more reflective of the purpose of the organization. The last conference titled the National Seminar in Research in Adult Education was held in Toronto, Canada in 1969.

Acting on Tough’s recommendations, the 1969-70 NSAER Executive Committee, made decisions: 1), remain apart from AERA because of concerns that AERA was too large a conference for many NSAER members’ liking. 2) Rename the NSAER to the Adult Education Research Conference (AERC) for the 1970 conference. 3) Write an AERC constitution and by-laws in order to pursue funding from various sources, because “with no formal structure you lose the ability to receive funds” (Groetelueschen, 1969). The first AERC was held in 1970 in Minneapolis, coinciding with the 1970 AERA conference.

Discussion and Conclusions

Through examining the early period of adult education as an academic area of study certain trends and issues become clear. The first is the overwhelming sensation that very little has changed. In these early years, faculty members were writing about the importance of theory and the importance of research, but they often failed to connect the two and rarely tried to establish a connection to practice. While many members of this small group remained committed to practice, there was a continuous focus on improving research; learning new research methods; and in general, establishing a better grounding in scientific methodology. However, this focus created a new set of tensions. These tensions were further reflected in the different, and at times competing, research meetings and conferences planned and conducted during these years.

Secondly, we are struck by the effort to delineate the field by limiting who could participate. This boundary setting involved a very clear delineation about who could participate in the Commission of Professors of Adult Education and at least initially, who could attend and present their research at the research conferences.

As we look at the current state of adult education - particularly the lack of funding and the failure to fully incorporate it into the educational agenda, we recognize that these current issues are the same problems that surfaced fifty years ago. The professors reacted then by asserting control over their own areas and trying to exclude others, at times marginalizing others

as they themselves were marginalized outside of their field. However, at the end they were still limited by their own sense of themselves as researchers and builders of a field.

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