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ABSTRACT

The relative newness of the field of adult education and the newness of its research has been one of the problems in the research-to-practice dilemma. Edcuators have a sense of uncertainty and hence uneasiness in their role as social scientists. Others feel that adult education research is too flawed or impoverished for adoption. Dissemination problems are another area of concern. One constraint to effective interaction between research and practice is that each activity is conducted under different reward systems. The language of research problems is another problem area. Mechanisms for research dissemination are already in place. Included among these are state, regional, and national conferences; information clearinghouses; professional association activities and resources; publications; and computer networking and teleconferencing. Assuming that these mechanisms are able to improve the dialogue between researchers and practitioners and that research findings get into the hands of those most able to use them, there is still the problem of new ideas or practices actually being adopted. The process of adopting research findings is largely informal, and the key to utilizing the informal system is finding a link among people and organizations. Such "gatekeepers" are characterized as readers of journals, persons acting as translators of what they read for their colleagues, networkers who maintain contacts outside their own organizations, and persons who function as advisers to their colleagues. Interaction between researchers and practitioners can be enriched by having researchers engage in practice and practitioners engage in reflective discussion for an alloted time each week. (MN)

The Research-to-Practice Dilemma

Sharan B. Merriam

Occasional Paper No. 123

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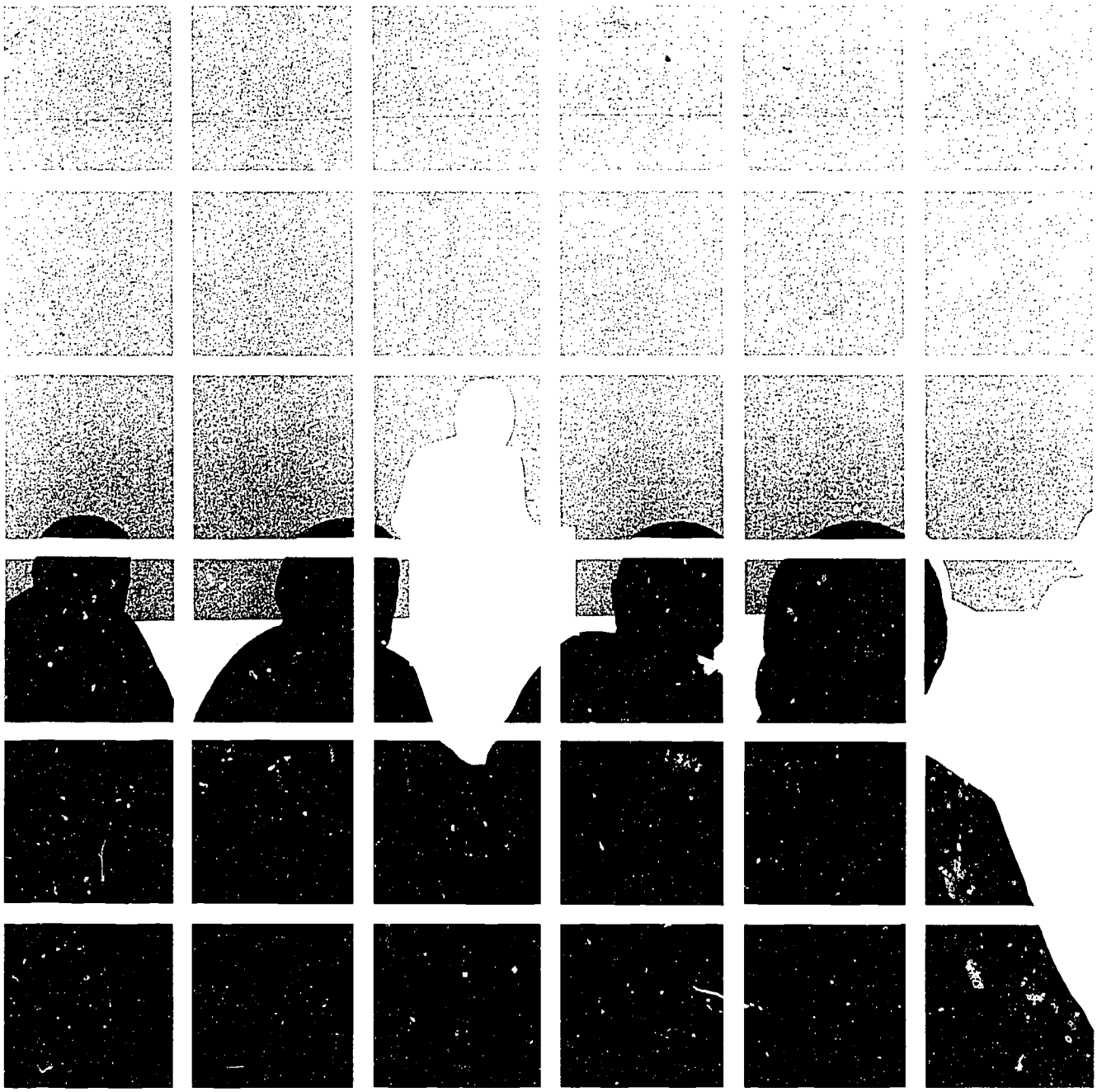

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Occasional Paper No. 123

THE RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE DILEMMA

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1986

FOREWORD

The term "adult education" refers to an increasingly broad scope of activities that take place in community and junior colleges, 4-year colleges and universities, secondary schools, military installations, correctional centers and churches, private firms, and other settings. By any definition, the adult education enterprise is growing by leaps and bounds. This can be attributed to changing demographic patterns, new requirements in the workplace, an expression of personal needs and interests, and/or an increasing dissatisfaction with formal schooling. The last triennial survey of adult education by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) shows over 21 million persons enrolled in some form of adult education. This includes a 21 percent increase over the previous 5 years in 25- to 35-year olds in postsecondary programs and a 43 percent increase in those over age 35.

The National Center for Research in Vocational Education has long been involved in adult education. Its efforts have included work in career development and planning for adults, underemployment, skills for the changing workplace, new directions in industrial training, industrial literacy programs, dislocated worker projects, entrepreneurship education, and programs for inmates and for individuals with limited English proficiency. Thousands of professional development activities have also been conducted through our National Academy for Vocational Education.

Sharan Merriam earned a doctorate in adult and continuing education from Rutgers University. She is currently a professor of adult education at the University of Georgia and previously taught graduate level courses in adult and continuing education at Northern Illinois University and Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. She worked with the Peace Corps in Afghanistan and also for the New Jersey Division on Aging. She is the author of 7 books on adult education, one of which, *Adult Education: Foundations of Practice*, won the Cyril Houle World Literature Award for the most significant contribution to adult education in 1985.

On behalf of the National Center for Research in Vocational Education and The Ohio State University, I am pleased to present this seminar paper by Sharan B. Merriam.

Chester K. Hansen
Acting Executive Director
The National Center for Research
in Vocational Education

THE RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE DILEMMA

Introduction

The major focus of adult education historically has been service to adults through the establishment of programs responsive to their needs. Questions about the direction of the field's growth and about ways to improve practice were not seriously investigated until the 1960s. At that time, graduate programs were expanding to meet the need for trained practitioners and, as Kreitlow (1970) observed, "research took root as an adjunct to these programs" (p. 138). As serious research and theory-bulding efforts have developed in adult education, questions regarding the relationship between research and practice have developed.

It would seem that the shared goal of improved effective practice could best be obtained if researchers and practitioners worked closely together, if researchers dealt with relevant questions and problems from practice, and if practitioners knew about and applied findings from research. Of course, it's not that simple. Definitional problems, as well as tensions and barriers, impede an ideal union of research and practice. The purpose of this paper is to examine some of these issues and to suggest a few small but realistic steps toward bringing the two activities of research and practice closer together.

Who's Who?

What do we mean by practice and who are *practitioners*? What is research and who are *researchers*? These very questions haunted the steering committee deliberations for the Midwest Research-to-Practice Conference 1983-1985. The committee wanted to attract more practitioners to the conference who would find the research presented useful. But who were they? Full-time administrators and teachers? Part-time graduate students doing research, but who also held full-time jobs? Part-time and volunteer adult educators who probably didn't even identify themselves as such? Conversely, who were adult education researchers? Are adult education professors automatically adult education researchers? Are faculty from other disciplines whose research topics sounded like adult education included? What about practitioners doing research? The distinction in roles is not clear.

Nor is the distinction in function clear. Is practice "doing" and research "thinking"? Is the distinction action versus reflection, frantic activity versus studied inquiry, or the front line versus the ivory tower? And does this mean that the ones who "do," can't be the ones who "find out"? That if we were in the ivory tower, we couldn't come down to the front line? Of course not. Probably no definitions of researcher and practitioner exist that are mutually exclusive. There are times when one functions like the other.

For the sake of exploring the issue, persons function primarily as practitioners if they are engaged in organizing learning or teaching adults. When a person reflects upon, or investigates in

a systematic manner, some dimension of adult education practice, that person is functioning primarily as a researcher. This activity is usually, but not always, linked with higher education graduate programs and, to a lesser extent, with private testing and consulting firms. The challenge is how to stimulate interaction between the two activities so that the entire field might benefit.

Problems with Adult Education Research

The relative newness of the field of adult education and the newness of its research has been one of the problems in the research-to-practice dilemma. There is a sense of uncertainty about adult education research; indeed, about most educational research. Eisner (1984) attributes this to educators' "uneasiness" in their role of social scientist:

> A great many in the educational research community wish to be known not as educators who research educational practice, but as psychologists, sociologists, or political scientists who happen to work in schools of education. As they see it, the better their work is, the more indistinguishable it will be from the work of their colleagues in the parent disciplines. Indeed, many educational researchers claim that education is not and can never be a discipline; it is an applied field—and what is applied is psychology, sociology, and so on. (p. 451)

The research we have, although maturing in technique and import, has its shortcomings. Roby Kidd (1981) enumerated many of these criticisms in a discussion of research needs in the field. Too often adult education research rises out of the idiosyncratic interest of the researcher, rather than what is most pressing to the field. We tend not to "monitor, learn from, apply, or use" research from other disciplines, nor do we keep in touch with adult education research from other countries. We look at problems in isolation unconnected to sociopolitical and economic realities. We haven't found ways for learners to benefit from our work. Our research is "how and now" oriented with little analysis from a historical or philosophical perspective. And finally, "much writing about research is as stylized as an airlines timetable and only half as exciting." (p. 57).

For some who might feel that adult education research is too flawed or impoverished for adoption, research from other disciplines provides an alternatiave. Jensen (1964) identified and, in a sense, legitimized "borrowing and reformulating" knowledge from other disciplines as a way adult education builds its knowledge base. The problem with turning to psychology, sociology, history, and so on is that, instead of having too little research, we have *too much* and it is too diffuse.

How does one begin to access and apply knowledge from even one area of another discipline? We often feel frustrated with the knowledge explosion. However, as the practice of adult education and the research about adult education continue to mature, the sense of uncertainty will give way to a sense of confidence in the research and its application to practice. Linking those who research and those who are in positions to apply new knowledge will continue to be a challenge. A closer look at the processes of dissemination and utilization leads to suggestions for enhancing interaction between research and practice activity.

Dissemination Problems

A constraint to effective interaction between practice and research is that each activity is conducted under different reward systems. If "improved practice" was the standard by which practitioners and researchers were evaluated and rewarded, then we would be a lot closer to dissolving the research-to-practice dilemma. However, this is not the case.

Those who are involved primarily in research are likely to be found in higher education institutions or consulting/contracting organizations. Research, grant acquisition, and publications are crucial to survival—so crucial in fact that there have been some rather famous cases of research fabrication for the sake of fame and publication. The reward system under which most researchers operate has a two-faceted dissemination problem. First, relevant research findings may never reach those who could make the most use of them. Results are more likely to be distributed to—

> the places that will best further the reputation of the investigator—the publications read by colleagues in research and education. Again, the fault lies not so much with individual investigators as with a system where the personal rewards of academic excellence can be gained only through recognition by one's academic peers. Since researchers are likely to be seeking advancement within the academic world, rather than outside it, the incentives lie in dissemination to other researchers. Only after this goal is reached are investigators inclined to share with practitioners in the field. (Shepherd 1982, p. 157)

The second part of the dissemination problem is in the language of research publications. Again, the reward system is at least partially responsible. Credibility and recognition from academic peers is obtained by writing in a "scholarly" fashion, that is, research jargon. The practitioner who views such writing as "pompous pieces of fuddy-duddyism" (Passmore 1984, p. 24) often dismisses research in its entirety. The practitioner is constrained by a system that rewards outcomes rather than improved practice. Survival for most adult educators is dictated by the numbers game, by an enrollment economy, by resource acquisition, by "the bottom line," and by politics. Practitioners are readily identified by their constant hustling, frantic pace, and incessant budgetary concerns. To learn about and apply research findings, let alone actually *do* some research, requires an investment of time and energy that most practitioners cannot afford.

What results is that researchers produce research and disseminate it to academic colleagues in forms that practitioners do not have the time or language to decipher. Conversely, we have practitioners who are in positions that would enable the identification of important research problems or the utilization of research findings without the support to do so.

Mechanisms of Dissemination

Mechanisms for research dissemination in the field of adult education are already in place. State, regional, and national conferences; information clearinghouses; professional association activities and resources; publications (journals, books, monographs, newsletters); and computer networks and teleconferencing provide vehicles for researchers and practitioners to interact with each other. Some interaction efforts have already been made. Within the last few years, *Lifelong Learning* has published research-oriented articles useful to practitioners. Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University has hosted conferences called "Sharing What Works."

Asking why an activity works or doesn't work moves us into an inquiry mode toward shaping new research questions. The ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult and Vocational Education has done much to disseminate reports and research. More might be done to distribute research summaries to relevant adult education settings such as adult basic education (ABE) programs, continuing education offices, and training centers. This is being done in other areas of education. I recall noticing the prominent placement of eye-catching short reports on topics such as "Does Class Size Make a Difference?" in a local public school office.

Available to adult educators is research that holds tantalizing possibilities for improving practice—if only it was known. Mention of four recent examples hopefully will stimulate some effort to look for other useful research. Fingeret (1983) discovered that illiterate adults establish well-structured social networks in which some personal skill or commodity is exchanged for reading assistance. Spear and Mocker (1984) found that self-directed learning projects are organized by the awareness and availability of resources in the learner's immediate environment. Many suggestions for approaching adult learners and enhancing adult learning can be drawn from these two studies. A different direction in adult learning research is Conti's (1985) work on teaching style and its effects on achievement. He found that ABE and English-as-a-second-language (ESL) students achieved more with collaborative, student-centered teachers, but general educational development (GED) students accomplished more in a teacher-centered mode.

Also, Darkenwald and Valentine (1985) have developed a scale that measures why adults do not participate in education. Program planners could make use of this scale to improve their practice just as teachers might want to match teaching style with learner goals.

Utilization

Assuming that with the aforementioned mechanisms we are able to improve the dialogue between researchers and practitioners, and that research findings get into the hands of those most able to use them, there is still the problem of new ideas or practices actually being adopted. The process of adoption is largely informal:

> This informal system is a social one in which ideas and information are communicated through interpersonal exchanges. These individuals exchange ideas, both verbally and in written communications. Often they attend the same meetings or conferences and are constantly informed about changing educational conditions and improved instructional strategies. This informal system operates for all professionals—from researchers to the administrators and other . . . level professionals who are responsible for and introducing change at the local level. (Mancall, Fork, McIsaac 1982, p. 259)

The key to utilizing the informal system is finding the person who acts as a link among people and organizations. These "gatekeepers" are characterized as readers of journals, including the more sophisticated ones in their field; translators of what they read for their colleagues; networkers maintaining contacts within and outside their organizations; and advisers to colleagues. Certainly, these people are easily identified in any adult education network and can be tapped as active participants in the research-to-practice interaction.

There are also more formal change strategies for impacting practice. Chin and Benne's (1969) well-known change model involves three strategies for planned changed: empirical-rational, normative-re-educative, and power-coercive. The first strategy appeals to a person's rational self-interest. We could, for example, show adult educators research supporting the contention that adults learn better under certain conditions and expect that this knowledge will result in certain practices. The normative-re-educative strategy recognizes that having knowledge or information alone does not necessarily lead to change. Change involves altering one's attitudes and values. The educator from the first example would have to experience a change in attitude in order for the knowledge to be implemented. The power-coercive approach means using power (preferably of a legitimate form) to bring about change. Teachers could be told that certain conditions must be brought about in their classrooms so that better learning can take place.

Three Suggestions

In exploring several facets of the research-to-practice dilemma, at least three suggestions can be made for bringing about greater interaction between practice and research. First researchers and practitioners should make better use of dissemination mechanisms that are already in place. Creative programming at conferences, relevant publications, and widely distributed research summaries do much to stimulate interest and awareness. This could be followed by informal networks and formal mechanisms for affecting change.

Second, researchers and practitioners should adopt research strategies that have the potential to impact practice more than the traditional forms. Action research, participatory research, interactive research—whatever the label—imply collaboration between participants and researchers throughout all phases of the study. This type of research usually involves determining mechanisms for dissemination and utilization of results before the research begins. Greater use of this mode of inquiry will help to dismantle the notion that research activity is the exclusive monopoly of "experts" or institutions rather than those most likely to be affected by it.

Third, researchers and practitioners should establish a simple procedure that is bound to improve the quality of dialogue between the two. Researchers, such as faculty in graduate programs who are not involved in practice on an everyday basis, should establish "practice hours" in the same sense that they are likely to have "office hours." This time would be set aside for engaging in some aspect of adult education practice, such as teaching a few hours a month in an adult learning program or interning in a corporate training center. Practitioners such as administrators, teachers, counselors, program developers, and policymakers, should schedule "reflection and discussion" time each week. Even 1 hour a week set aside to examine practice issues is likely to bring about increased clarity and direction in practice. Business and industry, driven by a profit motive at least as strong as any adult education enterprise, have made use of this strategy with great success.

Conclusion

Research and practice in adult education can be enriched through closer contact with each other. From practice can come relevant questions and problems worthy of investigation, and from research can appear methods and information to improve practice. Bringing about greater interaction and understanding between research and practice hinges upon blending, rather than sharpening, the distinctions between these two dimensions of our field.

The reward structure that currently leads to separating one activity from the other needs closer scrutiny and change. Also worthy of attention are the means by which research findings are disseminated and adopted into practice. The field could make better use of mechanisms already in place. A second strategy for blending research and practice is to make greater use of collaborative research methods. Last, the suggestion was made that researchers should engage in practice and practitioners should engage in reflective discussion for an allotted time each week.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Sharan B. Merriam

Question: Would you point out about half a dozen of the major issues that are current in adult education and what research is needed to go along with these issues?

That's a big order. I am teaching "Issues in Adult Education" as a doctoral seminar. I hadn't taught this class before, so when I started to put it together I called around the country to some of my colleagues and said "Do you have this course called 'Issues'?" Almost everyone has a course called "issues," but there wasn't much commonality. Some people used the course as an opportunity to discuss one issue in depth. Others approached it as a survey sort of thing. The most helpful response I got was from a colleague who said "I think of issues as the discussions that are going on in the field right now."

What are the discussions that are going on in the literature, professional meetings, and among colleagues on the staff? I thought about that and put together an outline of the issues to be covered in the course. Some of the issues we will be discussing are about the knowledge base—what it is and how we develop it; how do we go about the development of knowledge and theory in our field?

A second issue, which has been probably the most problematic for our field and the most pervasive issue, is that of equal access or equal opportunity. Participants in adult education are white, middle class, and well educated. The absolute best predictor of participation in adult education is formal schooling. The more schooling you have had, the more likely you are to participate in adult education. The second best predictor of participation is age, in reverse. The older you are, the less likely you are to participate in adult education. This combination of predictors speaks to the problem. We do not draw minority groups, we do not draw different age groups, cultures, or races. We perpetuate the status quo. There is a lot of discussion as to why and how to address this issue, and there are no easy answers.

Another issue is continuing professional education as a growing area of adult education. Professionals of all backgrounds are returning for more education after they have their terminal degree, their certificate, and their license to practice. It is being mandated in almost all states. You have to have a number of hours of continuing professional education in order to be relicensed or recertified or to continue practicing. The nature of this continuing professional education—what is is, what it should be, how it can be delivered—are all things that are being discussed in the field. The subissue is mandatory continuing education. It is very problematic. Our field is built on volunteerism—people volunteering to learn. There supposedly is a big difference between adult education and schooling. We are supposed to have volunteer audiences that are highly motivated. If you have a group of dentists sitting in front of you who would rather be anywhere else, what happens to instruction? I might also add that continuing professional education is one of the better job possibilities for people in our field. We are seeing people in our graduate programs getting doctorates in adult education and being hired by professional associations to do continuing education because they have those skills. The graduates hired do not always have a background in the

particular professions. I have a very good friend who does continuing education for lawyers in Chicago. She does not have a law degree. Another one does this for a medical association, another in pharmacy.

Literacy is another issue. There is a lot of attention on literacy now. Many people are thinking about the literacy issue and who should determine what the level of literacy should be in our society. What does functional literacy mean? There are a lot of value questions in the whole area of literacy.

Another area is the professionalization of the field. Do we want to become a profession like other professions? To what extent is becoming professionalized self-serving? Will keeping certain people out give us some visibility, some clout, some power to do our job better? There are arguments on both sides.

Centralization and coordination of the field is another issue. Our field is tremendously diffuse and divergent. We like to think that anyone who deals with adults is under the rubric of adult education, including ASTD, which has some 60,000 members. We like to think that although they are in a business and industry setting, they are still working with adults in an educating capacity. Therefore, they are adult educators. Our field is enormously diverse, and that is a disadvantage when we seek financial support. People don't understand us and don't see a coordinated effort. There are problems with having a coordinated effort, too. You give up some of the entrepreneurial independence that has characterized our field for so many years.

I think we are getting enough description for most of these problems. We know who the illiterate is, we know who the participant is, we know the diversity of the field, but that does not help us to answer these questions. We need more explanation. Research should give us answers as to why it's the way it is. The research could be historical or philosophical, examining some of the assumptions that have led us to where we are in our field. It certainly can be more participatory. And having a predisposition as I do toward qualitative research, I would say that qualitative approaches to these questions can help us gain insight and understanding that we cannot gain from a pure quantative approach.

Question: You mentioned that one of the problems of research in adult education was the lack of linking with the social and political context. I noted that in the issues you addressed just now, you did not address any of the social and political context. My question is why is there so little of this discussion in the United States when there is much more of it in adult ed in other countries? What might be done to grapple with those issues in the United States?

I did not mean to imply that the social and political context is unimportant for any of those issues. I think we have been psychologically oriented. Our research has focused on adult learning—how adults learn—rather than the adult role in society and the adult's relationship to society and the political dimension. There are organizations and groups that are trying to address this. One example is an organization in Wisconsin called Basic Choices. The community-based school movement is also conscious of this. There have been numerous conferences on rekindling a social commitment in adult education in the last year or 18 months. There have been conferences that addressed the lack of attention to the social and political dimension. Also, quite frankly, the nature of our enterprise really is a product of the middle class status quo in this country.

I think another problem in adult education is that we are so driven by the numbers game. You have to fill those classes or you don't get funded. If you take a chance and offer a class to a group

that has previously not been participating, you are taking a big chance with your own survival. You can offer 10 sections of tennis to make up for that 1 class in nuclear fall-out, but you have to support those classes that are more socially conscious. It has to do with the way our enterprise is organized and funded.

The federal government will only fund adult education as long as it addresses deficiencies, as in ABE or ESL, or if it keeps the lid on unemployed youth so that we don't have dissatisfied people being nonproductive members of our society. That is the funding question in adult education. Get into a context where some techniques of consciousness raising and empowerment might be used and it is threatening to the system. I have seen a program in Chicago where they built an Hispanic adult education program on empowerment notions and the Chicago city system withdrew the funding. These are issues we should be examining but the policymakers don't want to deal with them for obvious reasons.

Question: Would you share with us what the two or three most powerful research paradigms would be in adult education?

The way I think of research paradigms are framework orientations toward research, and those are generic. There are research strategies that could be used for any field or anything you want to study. The ones that have revealed the most about adult education practice, in my opinion, are the ethnographic qualitative studies. Of the four studies that I mentioned today, one was an ethnographic field study and anothe was a qualitative study of adult learners. If you look at the major research studies or the major lines of inquiry in our field, they were almost all started by a qualitative paradigm. Tough's work on adult learning projects, for example, initiated a lot of research on self-directed learning and his study was with 66 learners. As another example of how qualitative research often opens new lines of inquiry, Cyril Houle, in his book *The Inquiring Mind*, interviewed 20 or so learners and came up with a typology of 3 types of adult learners: activity-oriented, goal-oriented, and learning-oriented. That study spawned a lot of research on the motivation of adults who participate in adult education. Roger Boshier from UBC developed the Education Participation Scale (EPS) that revealed six major orientations or motivations instead of the three. That scale has been used all over the world in studies of participation. An interesting thing happened recently. Roger allowed anyone to use his scale as long as they reported the findings to him; therefore, he has collected this enormous data bank of findings using the scale. He did an analysis of all of the participation studies. There was an "N" of 10,000 for all these studies. He put the results of all these studies into the computer, did a cluster analysis, and verified his five or six orientations. Then he said, "I'm going to see what happens if I throw all of the 10,000 into the computer and tell it to come up with 3 solutions. I want three orientations." The three orientations that emerged look a lot like Houle's original three. Qualitative studies generate the hypotheses, and then we can use quantative measures for verification. Finally, we need more work in the history of adult education.

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