

ESTABLISHING CONCEPTUAL BOUNDARIES: WHAT IS AN ADULT EDUCATION PROJECT?

David S. Stein
Associate Professor
Workforce Development and Education
Ohio State University, Columbus

Abstract

In a movement toward workforce development as an academic entity, the identity of adult education as projects for inquiry is troubled. In some academic programs, adult education has been termed adult learning in the service of promoting teaching and learning for the workplace. However, adult education's inquiry, its projects, might be more than just teaching adults or researching how adults' learn. This paper presents an argument that adult education projects might have a social justice focus. Adult education might serve as a critique of social, educational, and political policies concerning work and the workplace.

It would be helpful for us (faculty in an academic program in workforce development and education) in the future to agree on a definition of what is meant by "projects in adult education". In fact many adult education researchers do projects in areas that might actually be considered HRD, or even policy development. Would these not be considered adult education projects simply because the researcher's professional identity is with human resource and or workforce development? What are the conceptual boundaries of "projects in adult education"?

The above quote was posed to our four member faculty, each representing identities in adult education, human resource development (HRD), career technical education, and policy studies. The question arose in the awarding of dissertation support endowed by professor Andrew Hendrickson, faculty member in adult education and the Director for the Center for Adult Education at the Ohio State University from 1947-1967. During the post World War II era, adult education was recognized by the College of Education as an area of study focusing on adult learning primarily in home, educational and community settings. The award stipulated support for a doctoral student doing research in adult education. To the faculty of the 50s -60s the boundaries of adult education projects must have been clear since the award did not specify conceptual boundaries. Over the past fifty years the study of adult education has remained but the academic entity known as adult education has lost its unique identity. In an era in which graduate programs in adult education are going under the rubric of workforce development, the meaning and boundaries of adult education is becoming problematic. What might be the boundaries that distinguish an adult education project from projects that research or teach adults?

The academic study of adult education at my university is located in a program area named Workforce Development and Education. The name represented a merging of identities among three academic courses of study, adult education, HRD, and career technical education.

To find a common area of interest the faculty considered workforce development and education as an emerging term, describing the collective of planned programs that advance social, economic, and educational progress at the national, organizational, or group level. “Workforce development is the coordination of public and private sector policies and programs that provides individuals with the opportunity for a sustainable livelihood and helps organizations achieve exemplary goals, consistent with the societal context” (Jacobs & Hawley, in press, p. 1). Issues for study in the new workforce development and education entity include: how schools and agencies prepare individuals to enter or re-enter the workforce, how organizations provide learning opportunities to improve workplace performance, how organizations respond to changes that affect workforce effectiveness, and how individuals undergo life transitions related to workforce participation. The common theme agreed upon by the faculty was on adult preparation for work, particularly paid work organized and delivered in corporate settings. The issues of importance concerned learning and its relationship to earning and performance. Adult learning rather than the term adult education is used in our program area to refer to the courses comprising an area of interest in teaching adults.

As programs in adult education, HRD, and career technical education are merged into entities such as workforce development, what becomes of the meaning and conceptual boundaries of adult education? What is an adult education project and, perhaps more importantly, what is an adult education perspective? The purpose of this paper is to argue criteria which may be helpful in distinguishing an adult education project from other projects which are concerned with adult interactions in the workforce or other settings. The ideas expressed are born from my experience as a practitioner and of my intellectual development in the academy.

I will present a perspective that the work of adult education embraces a social justice agenda and that adult education projects might inquire about the ways in which access to learning and the benefits of learning are distributed throughout our society. I will first provide my perspective that adult education is not synonymous with teaching adults or adult learning. I will not argue for a specified definition since adult education as a community has not agreed on any one specific definition (Merriam & Brockett, 1997). Next, I will argue that the meaning of adult education is found in the ideological perspective which advocates confronting of critical issues, promoting action taking, and building and supporting connections for adults to repair the world.

Distinguishing features of an adult education project may lie in the way in which adults come to take responsibility for and respond to the challenges of living in a democratic society.

An Adult Education Project Embraces the Collective Good

In university programs in which an interest in adult education, HRD, or career and technical education might be represented by a single faculty member, what is it that distinguishes the agendas of this faculty? Every year the question emerges as new graduate students think of our areas of study as technical –instrumental knowledge designed to enhance skills in working with adults in a variety of settings- mostly learning for earning. New graduate students who come to our program with an identity as a trainer or teacher ask for a specified and instrumental definition of adult education. It would be simplistic to say that any instruction or research

concerning adults might be considered the domain of adult education and that adult education is the parent or a close relative of HRD and career technical education.

Beginning graduate students in our program have difficulty accepting the concept that a definition of adult education would restrict our area of practice and diminish the vitality and flexibility of our practice. Rather than provide a definition of adult education, I prefer to discuss adult education as a perspective. A perspective is an artist's tool for creating a way of seeing, for creating a reality out of two dimensions. Perspective creates the illusion of depth by drawing the eyes toward the intended vision of the artist. A perspective is a way of integrating beliefs, values, theories, and concepts which guide our actions (Mezirow & Associates, 2000). An adult education project investigates ways in which adults are better able to understand the forces and events which might bring imbalance to their lives.

My perspective had been formed in graduate school and transformed from my practice and reflection on that practice. When I entered the field of adult education, my community of practice was organized around issues related to program development, heavily influenced by the adult education as liberal university extension. My texts were the *Black Book* (Jensen, Liveright, & Hallenbeck, 1964) and a belief emphasizing adult education as the road to personal fulfillment and intellectual growth. My practice was in the sphere of community education for personal development. Later I entered corporate training and development, and adult education was job related instruction. Adult education was a set of technical practices designed to distinguish the teaching of adults from children (Knowles, 1970). Adult education was a set of technical practices informed by an emerging definition of HRD. Nadler (1971) contrasted training for specified and observable performance with development (adult education) as learning for an unspecified future but which might influence an adult's world view. Training was planned, implemented, and evaluated by the organization, while development was provided externally in many cases to the place of employment. Essentially, those processes and concerns which were not related directly to organizational outcomes were in the domain of adult education. Later, my experiences working with communities in the public health area enlarged and refined my perspective that the meaning of adult education may lie in the social rather than in the individual, a commitment to a view of adult education as a means for social change through providing citizens with the intellectual and social tools necessary to understand, challenge, and take action on the issues confronting their daily lives as members of a community of inquiry.

The tension between learning for individual gain and the social good emerged as a force challenging notions of the purposes of adult education and the reasons for engaging in adult education programs. In their classic work of adult enrollment patterns, Johnstone and Rivera (1965) identified the types of programs in which adult learners were most likely to invest their time and money. A primary motive was to select subject matter most directly related to the daily tasks of making a living. Earning a degree was a strong factor for adults to return to school but not as strong as the desire to improve one's occupational and financial status through better jobs—a strong vocational orientation. The foundation for adult enrollment was to improve one's occupational standing by improving present performance or seeking learning for a new occupation. Houle (1961) suggested two other motives that propelled adults toward non-formal and formal learning opportunities. In addition to a vocational orientation, adults might attend educational programs as an opportunity to socialize with others (i.e., attendance at an

educational program was an opportunity to interact with others in a structured manner). Houle further proposed that some adults would participate simply to be intellectually challenged—to study for the sake of mastering a body of knowledge. Adult education was provided for the good of the individual to enhance economic or intellectual life. In the industrial era, the need for more structured adult learning as a necessary component of occupational advancement and maintenance becomes a primary motive for adults to engage in education for adults. Learning becomes more of an individual competitive advantage. Use of the term adult education implied learning experiences for those ‘out of school’ and described places for learning that were not necessarily linked to educational institutions.

Adult Education is not a Synonym for Adult Teaching or Adult Learning

I struggle with distinguishing my perspective of adult education from that of others who work with, instruct, and research adult concerns from a standpoint that embraces adult education as knowledge transfer or adult education as a program for those who have achieved a certain chronological age or stage of educational attainment. Thus, I make a distinction between those who teach adults and those who engage in adult education. I will not argue that knowledge transfer is not necessary, but I will frame adult education projects as inquiries concerned with understanding how adults come to ask questions concerning what for, why, and whose purpose might be served by engaging in a particular learning or teaching activity. One could argue that that I am neglecting the importance of training and vocational preparation for adults. Training does account for a majority of dollars and hours invested in employee educational experiences. In a sense, the value of adult education as training is in its contribution to increasing the productivity of citizens as producers of the GNP. However, I maintain that adult education as an informal system should be the means by which adults acquire wisdom through critical thinking more than being used as the term to describe acquiring occupational skills. Thus, I support the notion of adult education as distinguished from adult teaching as argued by Brookfield (1985):

[Adult education] is to be distinguished from adult training, in which a set of previously defined skills, knowledge, and behaviors are transmitted to trainees in a manner previously defined by the trainer. For a training course to be regarded as adult education it would have to have a willingness to consider alternatives to the prevailing or organizationally prescribed norms governing professional behavior. (p. 46)

Adult education serves to raise the questions that adults might not want to think about and provides the space and tools to help adults confront the issues of their daily lives. Adult education embraces learning about living so that adults may clearly see their world from a socio-historical, political, and cultural viewpoint (Briton, 1996). Thus, adult education should be less about job training, personal enhancement, or dealing with adult life transition and more about thinking, naming and acting in the world so as to bring about positive social change.

Adult education’s place in the learning of an adult is to confront, challenge, and change perspectives. These connections to issues of confronting, challenging, and changing perspectives make a project an adult education project. Adult educators support, through their instruction, giving voice to marginalized citizens, sharing in knowledge creation, building on the daily life

experiences, and providing an opportunity through the learning process to assist adults to confront the realities of the workplace, their communities, and the larger communities which influence and shape their daily lives (Hayes & Flannery, 2000). Wise and Glowacki-Dudka (2004) position adult education as a space for dealing with issues of racism, sexism, and identity politics, in settings including corporate, community, and academic places. What gives meaning to those who practice adult education is the ideological positions held by practitioners regarding not how adults learn but what it is adults learn and how adults use that knowledge to bring about a social good. An adult education project makes the ordinary in an adult's life extraordinary.

Adult Education Troubles the World

Reading the history of adults seeking learning opportunities under difficulties in the United States (Kett, 1994), we can begin to see some of the ideological threads regarding adult education and the purposes for which education was obtained. Adult education had been the means for promoting individual and social change through the dissemination of useful knowledge. Adult education has embraced four purposes, helping adults change their social conditions, adjusting to societal and technological shifts by obtaining knowledge and skills, promoting better problem solving skills to deal with life's challenges, and promoting participation in the civic domain as critical and reflective thinkers and actors (Apps, 1973; Beder, 1989). I think it is important to note that learning seemed to be a means rather than an end in itself. That is engaging in learning was seen as way to attain a greater good or bring about a social purpose, to enable an informed, critically thinking, reflective, and involved citizenry. I should also note that providing educational opportunities is not a neutral activity. Formal education and even the teaching of adults as expressed in informal systems and in state sponsored programs for adults have had a political and cultural values message. Through mandatory adult learning, society is protected from reckless drivers and guaranteed professional competence and responsible parents.

Adult education may be a tool for revealing, challenging, and expanding the opportunities for adults to understand the hidden messages and values in state and institutionally sponsored learning opportunities. Adult education should not be used to fit adults to the social order but to trouble the order to change the social order so as to reduce or eliminate inequalities- a social justice perspective.

Thus adult education projects include education for social and political movements (English, 2005), education for challenging inequality (Heaney & Horton, 1990), and education for promoting democracy- improving civic life (Stein & Imel, 2002). Adult education goes beyond the challenges of earning a living or correcting deficiencies in earning a living. The agenda for adult education is to help adults learn to see and act upon the inherent contradictions and hidden messages of post modern society.

Throughout most of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, adult education was linked to civic involvement. Knowledge was obtained in order to engage in discussion over the issues of the day or to lead the citizenry through public service (Kett, 1994). One might say there was a notion that education was a means for insuring the collective good of society. Self-improvement was linked not necessarily to individual achievement but to the contributions one could make to

a democratic society. Linked to the concept of civic improvement, adult education becomes a means for improving society through study of the issues contributing to inequity, inequality, and injustice (Gastil & Keith, 2006). Linked to the concept of civic improvement, adult education becomes a means for improving society through study, discussion and engagement with the questions that challenge and provoke the citizenry. This type of adult education project goes beyond the learning experiences adults have planned and promoted to correct deficiencies in initial learning provided by the state, or to maintain or increase competencies required to engage in daily living (including job and family).

Adult education is an alternative to the dominant educational voices and ideas. Adult education is the means for adults to quickly respond to needs that arise from contemporary events. Adult education provides a flexible response to changing societal conditions. Sheared and Sissel (2001) remind us that adult education confronts the hegemony in which opportunities for adults to participate in learning have been designed, delivered, and practiced. Adult education reminds us from its locations that dominant cultures may limit or extend educational opportunities to some based on gender, ethnicity, language or class. Adult education projects help adults to understand their emerging identities and the forces that continue to influence and shape that identity. It is not about how to learn but how to live through learning. Adult education projects illustrate not how adults learn but how adults live through learning. It is in the stories of adults seeking opportunities to learn and taking action on that learning that one finds the meaning of an adult education project.

Adult Education is Action

The idea of action is crucial to the meaning of adult education. Action is related to understanding how to deal with the challenges of living in a democratic society. The 1960 *Handbook of Adult Education* framed adult education as the way to assist adults to adjust to the rapid changes of society through systematic and planned study (Hallenbeck, 1960). While marginalizing more vibrant and community based forms of learning, Hallenbeck (1960) did recognize that a democratic society required that adults act on learning acquired through programs of study.

However adult education is a means to accommodate to the changes and shifts in society rather than critiquing and questioning the shifts. Adult education is not a curriculum, a program, a subject or a place. Adult education is the response of citizens freely choosing to serve society.

The job of adult education is to help people to understand the basis of order and security in a world of rapid change and to build their goals realistically in fitting terms as to help people understand the problems, discover the resources which are available to them, and to find the way to solve their problems and to reach their goals under current circumstances. (Blakely, 1960, p. 31)

The notion of adult education as an adaptive response to technological and social shifts is change is countered with the idea of adult education as a means to achieve greater social consciousness. Lindeman (1961) believed that sooner or later all adult education groups become social action oriented. Education becomes a means for groups to develop greater consciousness

of the issues and conditions effecting working people, women, and other groups. Through education, one might come to see the need for greater solidarity to confront the issues affecting particular classes.

Adult education projects are designed to enable individuals to achieve a potential to act in informed and critical ways that lead to collective action (Sirianni & Friedland, 2006). Thus one might ask when considering the nature of adult education, who benefits ultimately from the ability of the adult to act? As an act of adult education, the benefit should improve the material conditions of the community in which the adult functions. Adult education is about choice and about freely inquiring and deciding to act. The meaning of adult education is for adults to learn how to use their power in ways which promote democratic values. Following in the activist tradition, Cervero and Wilson (2001) cast every act of adult education as social activism. Adult education projects assist adults with learning how to live with power, use power, and apply power in the interests of social justice. John Aeschbury (personal communication, January 18, 2006), lead organizer for a community social justice group in Columbus, Ohio, advocates an adult education curriculum focused on how to use power in the service of building dignity, equality, and responsibility. The learning goal for community based learning-activist groups is to create and apply power in strategic ways to deal with hunger, healthcare, and homelessness and to influence the social agenda.

Adult Education Projects Provide Adults with the Confidence and Competence to Take Action

Adult education projects create social capital. Social capital is characterized as social connectedness, social interactions, and social networks in which members of a community develop norms for collective action through mutual support for accomplishing goals that enhance community life (Putnam & Gross, 2002). Social capital might be considered as a measure of the health of civil society and by extension the robustness of a democracy. Learning that promotes the community good, that is designed with agreed upon outcomes, that uses existing networks or builds new networks, and that is directed toward issues facing a community might be characterized as learning to develop a community's social capital (Balatti & Falk, 2002).

Social capital can be conceptualized as a community resource that builds from group members acquired knowledge, from the networks established through cooperative activity that might include situations designed to promote learning, and from identity resources developed from engaging in social activity such as trust, increased competence, or developing voice (Balatti & Falk, 2002). Social capital, according to Niemela (2003), is the ability of citizens to cooperate, to use resources, to create networks, to become engaged with each other and to take responsibility for the issues affecting the community. The degree to which individuals engage with the issues is the degree to which social capital increases and the ability of a community to confront and challenge social and institutional barriers to equality increases.

Field's (2005) work on social capital and education shows that civic involvement is related to opportunities to participate in meaningful lifelong learning. When educational experiences de-emphasize technical knowledge as a solution to community problems and engage learners in more critically reflective learning, in helping to understand other views and one's own stand point, civic participation may increase as an outcome of an educational

endeavor. An adult education project creates learning situations which develop a sense of reciprocity, interdependence, and social involvement. Adult education becomes the space for adults to find their voice, a public voice and influence civic actions in their communities (Mathews, 1999). Through adult education adults might be able to take ownership of the situations which influence their daily lives.

What defines a project as adult education is the purpose and instructional belief that adult learners are co-participants in the experience and make meaning from their shared interactions. The engagement with content and process is with the intent of coming to understand through action the ways in which learning can be put in the service of the common good. Of course individual benefits will accrue but the concern is with the collective good. It is not enough to teach adults literacy skills without providing opportunities for adults to consider and confront the structures which lead to illiteracy. It is not enough to teach job skills without having adults realize the conditions leading to unemployment, underemployment and how their actions might contribute to perpetuating present conditions. It is not enough to study issues around homelessness without challenging the economic and social systems which foster homelessness. Knowledge without understanding the context within which that knowledge is acquired or how that knowledge might be applied is simply an educative process but is not adult education. The inputs and outputs of learning are owned by the participants. The concept of ownership of the process and the uses of content for me are critical aspects of what it means to engage in adult education. Adult education is in the service of the collective good, it is the means rather than the end in and of itself. Adult education provides confidence that adults can take charge and enact meaningful change (Schied, 2001).

The meaning of adult education work is found neither in a technical approach to teaching nor in a subject matter taught to those who legally, culturally, or economically may be defined an adult. The meaning of adult education work is to be found in the commitment to working toward the social good, to approaching a learning encounter from the perspective of promoting social justice in the service of democracy and as an act of improving the world. Adult education is a component of a society that continually seeks to build critical thinking and social action across every level of society. Lindeman (1945) expressed this idea as a struggle between complacency and the challenge to become informed and critical thinkers:

For me, adult education is about the business of building democracy. It is the struggle - whether in the workplace, in community, or in society - to become informed and critical decision-makers in matters affecting our day-to-day lives. Its purpose is the democratic fulfillment of human potential for freedom through social means.

While there are organizations and institutions devoted specifically to this purpose, the struggle for democracy - and, therefore, adult education - is not limited to these special venues. Its distinctive practice, however, whether in the open spaces of schooling or training, or in the midst of a social movement, is always social education for purposes of social change. (p. 116)

So What is the Work of Adult Education?

My response to my workforce development and education colleagues is that an adult education project is not defined by the professional identity or academic credentials of the researcher or by the disciplinary nature of the field in which the project is conducted. An adult education project to me represents an inquiry committed to understanding how adults engage in learning to confront and challenge the assumptions and ideologies defining their roles as citizens in workplaces, civic, social, religious and other communities. An adult education project finds its meaning in the manner in which it seeks to produce knowledge and to whom that knowledge is made available. The meaning of adult education work lies in the contribution made by the participants as adults seek and explore the tensions found in everyday life. Adult education is not found in the classroom, training room, or any room but in the engagement of learners with the situations of the day, through interactions with others to come to better understand the ways in which our society functions and ways to address the forces which shape and influence how we as adults think, feel, and act.

The boundaries for an adult education project are set by an ideological stance to promote and restore social justice in the communities where adults live. The stance may be operationalized through learning activities which raise critical questions about the ordinary, taken for granted aspects of living and earning. Providing adults with the tools to critically think through the values, beliefs, and assumptions and assisting adults to act in ways which are socially responsible is included within the boundaries for an adult education project. Adult education projects promote adults working together to enhance a community's social capital. Through adult education projects, ordinary people, the foundation for a democratic society, can challenge, confront, and change social policy in ways which restore voice to those disenfranchised due to lack of knowledge, lack of opportunity and lack of power. Adult education projects are about learning to live, to assume the obligation to participate in the opportunities to influence social policy, and to take responsibility for the decisions and actions of one's community.

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