

Part 1: General Perspectives on “Adult Educators”

Paul Bélanger
President of ICAE, Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM)

On Becoming an Adult Educator. What happened since CONFITEA V ?

Introduction

The whole history of adult education and adult learning can be seen as a balancing act between two tendencies. There are periods where the leading logic has been more centripetal, with efforts to organize the field of as a genuine area of expertise, meanwhile, in other periods, a centrifugal logic, characterised by efforts to recognize transversal learning demands, becomes prevalent. The historical evolution of this field is always in tension between a tendency toward professionalisation searching to institutionalize the field and a movement inspired by a vision of life-wide and life-long learning as an empowering process required in all areas of human activities.¹

The history of our field is, indeed, a dialectical process between a search for the recognition of the specific expertise of adult education and an attempt to reconstruct the entire of territory of adult learning in all its forms and domains of activities. The drive to acknowledge the learning demand (Belanger & Federighi, 2000, chapters 6 and 7) in social movements, in industry or in health domain and to enhance people capacity for action, paradoxically, is often at odds with the

Paul Bélanger: After directing research centers on education and work in Québec, Canada, Paul Bélanger became director (1989-2000) of the UNESCO Institute for Education in Hamburg, Germany and in 1997, the General Secretary of CONFITEA V. He is now professor at the UQAM Montreal Univ. and director of the Interdisciplinary Research Center on Lifelong Learning (CIRDEP). He is author and co-author, in particular, of *Lifelong Learning* (Kluwer, 1995), *Shifting Patterns in Adult Education Participation* (Pergamon, 1997), *Transitions toward LLL: social indicators* (Tokyo, 1998), *Transnational Analysis of Adult Learning Policies* (UNESCO, 1999) and *Participation à l'éducation des adultes* (CIRDEP, 2004). He is currently president of ICAE, the International Council for Adult Education.

¹ See, for example, (Fieldhouse, 1996), the historical development of British adult education seen in its wider policy and cultural context or, in USA, the historical study of Stubblefield and Keane (1994).

necessity to professionalize the field and train adult learning specialists, precisely to meet such a transversal demand. We can indeed read the recent history of the UNESCO international conferences² on adult education the CONFINTEA conferences, in that perspective (Meyer, 1997).

1. The International Conferences on Adult Education: the CONFINTEA

Three years before the fifth International Conference on Adult Education, in 1994, as the director of the UNESCO Institute for Education, I had to obtain from the Director General of UNESCO his support and patronage to give priority to the preparation and organization of this international event. At first, Mr. Frederico Mayor was somewhat sceptical about the necessity of such a conference at the end of the 20th century. His spontaneous perception of the field, prevalent in many decision-making centres, was one of remedial education: if adult education, in the past, was an important domain for 2nd chance education, this domain was now bound to disappear with the increasing universalisation of initial education. Then, I told our Director General: "Give me five minutes to explain the necessity of adult learning today and, then, I will abide by the decision you will take." I subsequently explained to Mr. Mayor how, for example, the growing issue of migration in Europe could not be tackled without adult education policies. I told him how crucial is adult education for the cultural, political and economic integration of migrants - crucial for 2nd language education, crucial for the education and training of migrant workers at workplace, crucial for them to better understand labour laws in recipient countries, crucial to benefit from the different services of welfare state, crucial for the parental role of immigrant population and hence the success of their children at school.

Realizing the growing social demand for adult learning, the Director General adopted at once such a prospective vision. He answered immediately: "We go. I will require all the Director Generals of all our different agencies within the UN families to join us in this key conference."

You know what happened next. You know how Mr. Frederico Mayor became a key player in the mobilization of the international community, from World Bank to FAO, from WHO to ILO, from the

2 All the CONFINTEA reports since 1949 are available at: <http://www.unesco.org/education/uie/confintea/publications.html>

European Community to the regional development banks as well as with the different countries in organizing this conference.

Indeed the decisive issue which drives the mobilization around CONFINTEA V Conference was the vision of adult learning as a transversal social demand for the future.

One has to remember the series of world summits held during the nineties, with the first conference on *Education For All* in Jomtien,³ followed by the Rio conference in 1992 on environment and then the conference on social development in Copenhagen, the summit on women in Beijing, then on habitat in Istanbul, three years before on population in Cairo and so forth. The astonishing fact is that, in each and all of those world summits, nearly half of recommendations had to do with the necessity to increase people capacity of action, to raise citizens' interest, to enhance adults know-how in order to deal with new societal risks: ecological risks, health risks, citizen passivism risks, poverty risks, etc.

The task of the UNESCO Institute for Education, between 1995 and 1997, at the moment of CONFINTEA V, was precisely to reconstruct, beyond semantic exclusion, the whole field of adult learning, adult learning as a right, adult learning as a shared responsibility, adult learning as a tool in all areas of activities and adult learning as a joy in order to fully recognize the dignity of each human being.

In the area of work, adult education was then reconstructed conceptually around the issue of continuing improvement of competencies, presenting the right to learn as an instrumental right for a full exercise of the right to work. In health, consultations were held with health promotion networks to explore jointly how, in the future, health prevention will become crucial to prevent epidemics and pandemics, precisely if we succeed in developing health sustainable prevention through learning interactive communication. Similar exercises were made around migration issues, as I explained earlier in my critical meeting with Mr. Frederico Mayor. On reproductive health and population issues, women movements came in to express the necessity for women to acquire knowledge and networking capacity in order to protect their right to responsible maternity. Similar initiatives took place on citizenship and democracy, on adult education and justice, in particular, around the right to learn

3 http://www.unesco.org/education/efa/ed_for_all/background/jomtien_declaration.shtml

of detainees as the most important rehabilitating strategy. The thematic development of CONFINTEA V encompassed other areas like autonomous ageing and economic and social autonomy of individuals with handicaps, as well as adult learning in media, in libraries and in museums.

In parallel with this conceptual reconstruction of the field, an effort was made, from an organization point of view, to re-link, around the idea of people's empowerment, the various potentially interested networks within the UN and the multilateral family, with WHO on health, with ILO on right to work and right to work related learning, with FAO on agricultural extension, with UNIFEM on gender, with UNDP on right to basic education in order to unlock barriers to implementation of new techniques of forestry, fishing and agriculture, with the UN Commission for Human Rights for the right to learn of detainees, with World Bank on issue of sustainable development through critical enabling right to learn throughout life, with UNICEF on the issue of women and children and on parental role for a successful schooling of girls and boys.

Of course this insistence on what I call the centrifugal trend of adult education history was not without problem. Groups of civil servants within UN and within UNESCO raised the issue that by bringing all other UN Agencies into the CONFINTEA process will make UNESCO loose its central role. The Director General and the UIE had to insist and explain that, on the contrary, by bringing back adult learning as a critical issue for the future of humanity in all fields of activities, the role of UNESCO, as a synergetic actor, will become even greater but, of course, with the necessity to adopt a different kind of practice.

CONFINTEA V. took place in Hamburg in July 1997 and, as a whole, was considered very positive. It brought back the adult learning demand as a priority on policy agendas of governments and international actors, thus enlarging the visions of adult education. CONFINTEA V promoted new forms of practice for the expression of the learning demand of adult population through the *Adult Learners' Week* movement.⁴ It enlarged the agenda for adult education research to the different thematics noted earlier on the relation between adult education and the different areas of development. It gave a new impetus to the demand for adult literacy thus correcting the post-Jomtien trend too predominantly oriented towards initial

4 <http://www.unesco.org/education/uiie/InternationalALW/>

education of children and, thus, disregarding the need for a two-pronged policy in this area.

The long term results of CONFINTEA V? They are both interesting and confusing. First, it is clear that the *Agenda for the Future* and the *Hamburg Declaration*, became important tools for many action groups and social movements as well as reference instruments for prospective policy makers in many countries. The two normative documents of the conference were largely disseminated around the world, translated in more than 30 languages. Through these, many countries were encouraged to develop specific adult learning policies. This was the case in the UK, in Brazil, in South Africa, in Thailand, in Malaysia, in Quebec within Canada and also regionally within the European Commission through its *European Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* and, in 2006, its *Communication on Adult Learning -it's never too late to learn*.⁵ The adult education movement is also using the CONFINTEA V *Agenda for the Future* and the *Hamburg Declaration* in their advocacy work at local and national levels.

However, CONFINTEA V had also some immediate misachievements. More importantly, the issue of training adult education specialists has been underrepresented as well as the need for developing specific expertise precisely to make adult learning a relevant input in different fields of intervention. In other words, referring to the two historical trends mentioned earlier, by insisting on the learning demand in a cross-sectorial perspective, we tended to forget the need for expertise and specialization precisely to be efficient in the organization of adult learning intervention in these various areas of activities.

At the *CONFINTEA V Post 6 Conference*, six years after Hamburg, other important setbacks were acknowledged.⁶ First, though many workshops within CONFINTEA V insisted on the necessity of adult basic education provision and explicit recommendations were expressed in this regard both in the *Declaration* and the *Agenda for the Future*, adult literacy remained, with few exceptions, either a low priority or a non transversal domain of learning, unconnected with health, poverty, agricultural and population issues, thus receiving less and less resources to meet nevertheless the immense demand for adult literacy. A second

5 http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/lll/adultcom_en.html

6 <http://www.unesco.org/education/uiie/confintea/fupstate.html>

setback had to do with the development in 2000 of the *Millennium Development Goals*.⁷ As you well know, only two of those MDGs have to do with education: one on initial education of children and the other one, within the goal on gender, on the importance of education of girls, rightly so. Adult education and adult literacy have been completely ignored in these eight *Millennium Development Goals*. Thirdly, because of the economic world context following 1997, the dynamic of adult education development tended to become more and more confined in one field: the area of work related learning.

Considering both achievements and setbacks, we were, nevertheless, able to enlarge the vision of adult learning, to bring back adult learning within many socio-economic policy demands as an enabling tool. We succeeded, at least partially, in demonstrating that adult learning has to be recognized as a fundamental enabling right for the exercise of all human rights. Strangely enough, by putting adult learning everywhere, we ran the risk of having it recognized specifically nowhere. Our victory, in a sense, was a pyrrhus victory; we did gain so much that, in the end, adult education was better acknowledged as a needed dimension of all areas of activities, but ran the risk of remaining a hidden one.

In other words, the Hamburg UNESCO CONFITEA V conference in 1997 did succeed in its effort to build and diffuse an enlarged vision of adult learning. However, by insisting too exclusively on expression of a demand for adult learning across sectors of activity, CONFITEA V tended to forget the expertise and specialisation needed for efficient provision of learning opportunities in these different areas.

2. The dialectics of the new adult learning general organisation

It is clear, today, that the critical issue for the development of adult education and adult learning is precisely to avoid choosing between the two centrifugal and centripetal development trends exposed earlier. The issue is to avoid opting for one logic against the other; it is to bring back the movement for specialization, professionalisation and specific expertise within the changing live world. The challenge for the future of adult education is to be able to provide the specific engineering and know-how of adult learning for the development of sustainable and significant learning in health, in environment, at workplace, in private life and so forth.

⁷ <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>

We should never forget the dialectics of adult education history. It is extremely vital to understand that these two trends are not exclusive, that the dialectic relations between these two logics have the fantastic capacity to develop a new dynamics for the development of adult education. However, three conditions will be required to “throw into gear” such dynamics.

A first condition is, of course, the recognition, by all the community of adult learning and adult education actors, of the complementarities of both logics. A second condition will be the increasing capacity of adult education specialists to work across institutional boundaries and to intervene upstream in the expression of social demands for new capacities of action of the adult population in all areas of activities. It will be the ability of adult education networks and institutions to develop specific expertise through research and training with a view to offer efficient diagnosis and learning approaches for ensuring significant learning opportunities in diverse settings. The third condition will be a more diffuse acknowledgment of the enabling nature of the right to learn of adults for the exercise of all other human rights.

The advocacy work thus required has to do not only with expression of learning demand but also with specificity of adult learning expertise to make sure that responses organised to meet learning demands are significant for the specific area of activities, its specialized discourse and its unique context. Paradoxically, only then could we see the perspective of life-long and life-wide learning emerging in real life.

Let me give few examples of such a perspective, first, around the issue of the *Millennium Development Goals*; The International Council for Adult Education (ICAE) and its networks were very present in the UN and at various meetings to ensure that adult learning be included in the MDGs. Nevertheless, we did not succeed. This disappointment was severe, because the MDGs process was the very first UN exercise based on a strict binding monitoring system to track the implementation of stated goals.

ICAE was then faced with two possibilities: either to criticize the fact that, here again, we didn't recognize adult education and to struggle for the integration of adult education within the MDGs. For this, the chance of success was limited. Instead, the ICAE movement decided on a very different strategy. In fact, if you look at the MDGs, they have to do with health, environment, poverty, initial education of children and gender justice. So, as an alternative strategy, they are

now trying to demonstrate that, indeed, for the implementation of all those goals, a critical factor will be adult learning, that is the capacity of action of the adult public, the know-how of people, the active participation of women and men. What ICAE's networks are now saying, as they began to do so in their World Assembly in Nairobi in 2007 is that if adult learning is nowhere explicitly in the MDGs, it is everywhere tacitly and needs to be articulated within each of these goals. Indeed, it will be impossible to reach the *Millennium Development Goal* on education, or the ones on gender justice, health, maternal mortality or environment, without critical investment in the development of adult capacity for initiatives related specifically to each one of these global issues. How, for example, can the world community implement the *Education For All* goal of children without the development of parental education, without increasing the basic skills of the parental generation?

Through this example, one can see how successful adult education advocacy is not advocacy for a profession, not a corporate advocacy, nor advocacy for reinforcement of existing institutions. It is advocacy for transversal necessity of competent, creative and informed adult participation in all domains of human activity. And yet, we are also now recognizing that such action will have no impact if it does not put forward and propose the specific expertise required for efficient development of such cross-sectorial approach to adult learning.

Another example of such perspective for the development of adult education is the growing concern for workplace learning. As you know, the main discourse on workplace learning is structured within an HRD (human resource development) perspective, referring to performance and skill improvement through professional continuing education, coaching and mentoring, training and apprenticeship, assisted informal learning and so forth. Such insistence on work related learning of active population as a critical input for development of productivity is indeed far from being bad news.

However, for this ambivalent development not to become bad news, expertise is required to ensure that learning opportunities at workplace are spread across the occupational ladder and that they lead to significant learning experience, thus facilitating the expression of social learning demands in other areas of activities.

Adult learning at work or in any other setting is always a subjective experience of a person constructing herself in relation to her past life course, her plural motivations and her projects for the

future. Such recognition of the intimacy of all learning experience transforms the expression of the learning demand. Any social learning demand, at workplace and elsewhere, is always the result of a mediation between the demand of the organization or the society, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the aspirations, fears, hopes, curiosity, interest and inner drive of each individual. Such a composite orientation of adult learning at work and the andragogical expertise to do so, will ensure more sustainable acquisition of skills and more efficient mobilization of these in daily work; besides it is bound to create a drive for the pursuit of interest in the entire territory of adult learning in all its forms, thus inciting people, as Alheit (1994) would say, to explore the potential of their life not yet lived.

The third example refers to health domain and, in particular, to health and AIDS. Public health systems are in financial crisis. Diverse scenarios are now explored for reduction of costs and increase of productivity. Within these, with a view to reduce the social demand, more and more decision-makers look at a possible transfer of investment from curative to preventive health and, within such new health promotion policies, from a prophylactic prevention to a more interactive learning based preventive policy. Such scenario could be observed in the domain of AIDS. If a society does not invest more and more on such prevention, the demand for curative policy will be so immense that such society will come to a tragic cul-de-sac. But, then, the question becomes: what kind of prevention is more efficient? In fact, the prevalent trend in health information-communication-communication (IEC) strategies is based on unilateral transmission of knowledge to targeted publics. The adult learning specialists could document the very limited impact of such a linear transmission of formal knowledge, even if recurrently repeated through publicity campaigns.

This is in such context that specific adult learning expertise could come in to develop health literacy (Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, 2004), enabling people to understand and act more autonomously, to improve health public education, to include adult learning component in continuing education of health specialists.

Through those three examples, one could see, how the two tendencies described at the beginning of this paper, could become either competing movements impeding the development of adult learning in present context, or complementary contributions to a new and much needed pattern of learning organization across adult life course and life spaces.

3. The Adult Learning Specialists

In this new and rich ambiguity, let us look at the changing role of adult learning specialists.

Of course, the adult learning specialist is, evidently, an expert to develop relevant learning responses to various demands of adult publics. An adult educator is one able to organize and animate significant learning activities, which relate to former experiences of the learner and on which he can build to develop further his capacity for action. Such adult educators are operating under very different kinds of names: adult educator in an adult education centre, an adult teacher, a continuing professional development specialist, a literacy worker, a health prevention counsellor, an environmental animator, a popular educator, an educational gerontologist, a tutor, a coach, a mentor, a programmer for e-learning in a blended learning approach, an agricultural extension worker, a consumer advisor or educator, a scientific vulgarisator, etc.

The adult learning specialist is also an upstream specialist for the full expression of learning demand. The expertise thus required has to do with information and counselling, prior learning recognition and organizing support for self-learning. This person is also an architect of stimulating learning environments, a coach of plain language communicator, a consultant on the complex and multiple financing patterns of adult learning activities (learning credits, paid education leave, vouchers registered tax continuing education plan, etc.), a practician of downstream activities for evaluation as well as for knowledge transfer and mobilization.

Such adult learning specialists are, then, important not only in recognized formal and non formal adult education institutions, organizations and networks but also, as adult learning specialists, in all areas of activities. An adult educator today is both a specialist for engineering significant learning activities and to refer to Boaventura de Sousa Santos (Dalea, R. & Robertson, S., 2004), a “*cultural translator*” having the capacity to work across cultural, academic and professional boundaries in order to understand and translate the need for new capacity of action in different areas of activities, These engineers of continuing education are prospective thinkers on life-long and life-wide learning, able to relate pre-school education, initial education and the complex reality of learning across adult life-course.

Becoming an adult educator or and adult learning specialist today is a challenge. It means precisely to be able to capture this balancing act in the history of our field and to avoid the two risks that we have

seen in our history: the risk of loss of relevance in the effort for institutional recognition, but also the risk of being present everywhere but nowhere recognized with our expertise.

Conclusion: CONFINTEA VI

In that perspective I think that CONFINTEA VI to be held in May 2009 in Brazil would probably focus on five issues.

The first issue will certainly be the absolute right of women and men as well as youth out of school to literacy and basic education, and more specifically, the strategies requires to have this right recognized as a legal entitlement.

A second issue will most probably be the need for action and rigorous monitoring to ensure real implementation of the *Hamburg Declaration* and the *Agenda for the Future*, as well as *EFA* goals. This conference needs to put in place efficient mechanisms to monitor the exercise by adults of their rights to learn throughout their life, and to report on the progression of adult learning as a diversified tool for sustainable and equitable development.

A third issue at this conference will certainly be, again as in 1997, the transversal specificity of adult learning, that is the genuine contribution of adult learning expertise and specialists in health promotion, at workplace, for autonomous ageing, for development of participatory welfare state, for successful migration, etc. CONFINTEA VI can become, in relation to the *Millennium Development Goals*, a unique opportunity to make decision-makers people understand precisely the critical enabling factor that adult learning constitutes for the implementations of the MDGs.

A likely fourth issue, we hope, will be adult education and peace. Peace is not the absence of war; it is not the management of risk by equilibrium of terror. Peace today is the needed life contexts for all of us, every night within our village and cities, to be able to meet together and discuss. The issue is for all women and men acquire the capacity and interest to deal with differences and to live with dissonance, to make dissonance not a factor of conflict but a heuristic context for learning.

Finally, CONFINTEA VI will be a success if, through its preparatory process and its holding in Brazil, the adult's right to learn becomes recognized by the world community as a fundamental enabling right for the full exercise of all the other universal human rights.

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