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On Becoming an Adult Educator The Meaning of and Possibilities for Historical Research in Adult Education

Abstract: An integral part of *becoming* an adult educator, or any professional for that matter, is having a healthy grasp of one's history. A conference addressing historical aspects of and topics in adult education, replete with an international audience, is a befitting arena to broach the question, then, of what we have done and are doing, its meaning, and what are future possibilities vis-à-vis historical research in adult education. This conference is the 11th in a series that has spanned several decades, produced numerous publications, and has brought together in discussion and dialogue individuals from disparate parts of the globe who value, understand, support, and see the meaning of embracing and pursuing historical research in the field. Accordingly, the session is formatted in a way so as to give voice to all those in attendance as we give sustenance and life to the past, present, and future of historical research in adult education. A review of past conferences and their themes, including this year's focus ("On Becoming an Adult Educator"), and other selected historical research in the field provides a framework to help ascertain the kinds of inquiries in which we are engaged and what seems to be missing, so that we all may together consider generating areas, both topical and methodological, in quest of a researcher.

Introduction

"On Becoming an Adult Educator," adopted as the theme of this conference, extends an invitation to consider the process of "becoming" from an historical perspective. Accordingly, an integral part of becoming a professional adult educator, or a professional in other fields for that matter, is to cultivate an understanding of and appreciation for one's history. This very conference represents a momentous advance in that regard as the 11th in a trajectory of conferences held over the past 20 years, specifically aimed at engaging colleagues from disparate parts of the globe to convene with the mutual concern of advancing an understanding of our history.

The theme of this year's conference, "On Becoming an Adult Educator," affords us an opportunity to highlight the fundamental

importance of these International Conferences in our *becoming* more centrally involved in recognizing and celebrating the importance of researching our history. Whose history is it, though, and what are we exploring, and what are we leaving out?

As the title suggests, this discussion addresses two queries:

1. What is the Meaning of Historical Research in Adult Education?
2. What are the Possibilities for Historical Research in Adult Education?

The Meaning Question

Meaning making, of course, is central to the growth of an individual or a field for that matter. The meaning question is multi-faceted. (a) What is the meaning of historical research; what constitutes historical research for adult education, (b) What definition(s) or rather conceptualization(s) of adult education is/are guiding our thinking, (c) What meaning does the process as well as the product of historical research have for us individually, and collectively for the field?

The Possibilities Question

What is possible, of course, is predicated in part on how we answer the meaning question, for which an array of answers may exist. Debates have abounded in the field as to whether only organized activities should be considered in conceptualizations, or whether acknowledgment should be given as well to the voices calling for the entire territory of learning from life as “legitimate” inquiry. Moving beyond the dichotomous nature of such thinking and embracing a spectrum of meanings, should we choose such a path, will result in a fuller response to the possibilities question. If we consider also that the focus of our efforts and understanding is not only the individual but also the contexts in which our “learners” find themselves (be it the relationship; the group; the institution, organization, or agency; the community, society-at-large during a particular time period or under specific economic, political, social, etc. conditions; the national and of course the greater global context) then our possibilities take on an even greater dimension. Such thinking then focuses our attention in addition on the kind of research in which other professionals may be engaged that is contiguous to, or has relevance to what we consider our field. Moreover, it may even coax our energies to partner with others in interdisciplinary efforts to better understand historical aspects.

Whose History is it, What are we Exploring, and What are we Leaving Out?

Whose History is it?

Certainly, there is a history of the field of study and practice that, understandably and finally, has received much focus and warrants continuous attention. Historical research is growing compared even to where we were 20 years ago. This approach has been a good start—that is, to better understand the roots out of which (what we call) our current field emerged, who and what influenced that process, and what led to the growth, development, demise or transformation of movements, institutions, ideas, etc. The history of ideas, however, seems to be the least studied of the other areas, a point to which I will return later. So, viewed from this lens, it is our history, the history of our field — at least those of us who identify as professional adult educators. Outside of the structure of “our field,” many more professionals are exploring the phenomenon of adults learning, changing, and growing which is becoming more pervasive, with increasing speed. When we consider the history of the research on how adults learn, for example, whose history is that? It becomes apparent when asking that kind of question, that many other disciplines have converged in illuminating our understanding: psychological influences, social class influences, cultural aspects of learning, neurological advances, etc. Are we ready to partner with these other professionals in any way? To what extent may some have already embraced this challenge, and with what results and experiences?

Research is often driven by the needs of the field but more often by the interests of individuals. So it might be instructive to consider that, when we ask the question of whose history it is, we are also embracing a history of the interests of our scholars. If we can address and uncover the meaning the process and our interest areas have for us as motivating factors in pursuing historical research, we might be able to encourage others to follow their interests, combine them with the needs of the field, and expand our possibilities for historical research in adult education. Toward that end, concluding consideration is given to what we have done, are doing, and what still beckons, leaving room of course for domains of research which may be stimulated by obscure but relevant interests of which we may be unaware.

What are we Exploring and What are we Leaving Out?

Reischmann (2005) uses the History Conferences as a gauge for how the field has evolved. Reflecting upon the evolution of all, at that time 10, conferences, he observes, resonating with Friedenthal-Haase (1998) that the first five conferences focused primarily on institutions, while the 6th “broke new ground” in spotlighting individual personalities, whether as educator or participant. This aperture, knowingly or unknowingly, heeded the concern and call from Coolie Verner, during the 1950s, that biographical inquiry in the field needed much attention and development. At the same time, Reischmann laments that in our historical research less emphasis is placed on how one learns from life. This year’s conference, catalyzed by Reischmann, has afforded us an opportunity to pursue that process as is evident with the use of the word “becoming” in the theme.

These history conferences are indeed of seminal importance and Reischmann’s analysis quite valuable, but if an observer were to read beyond that, and gauge the scope of the field and its seemingly former narrowness from the conferences alone it becomes risky, especially were we to take that analysis as the whole. Of course, again we are beset with the issue of definitions and conceptualizations. Researchers who identify themselves with other professional affiliations have been busily exploring many facets that fall within the purview of adult education.

Reviewing the research and papers published as a result of these conference, coupled with a systematic and cumulative review of Dissertation Abstracts, Historical Abstracts, Worldcat (for books from around the globe), Library of Congress data bases, and other referencing systems suggests an emerging convergence of key content and topical areas being investigated. (Complementary attention is needed to methodological matters).

As a very cursory sampling, we seem to have accumulated much data on the history of:

Adult Education in specific continents, countries, regions, and communities - which has enabled comparative research as well (also emerging are unwritten histories to augment or revise the history of adult education in various countries). Two such examples at this conference are: Avoseh on the unwritten history of adult education in traditional Africa and Busto Gilligan who focuses on 20th century adult education in Ireland with the question: “The full story?”

Adult education as a social movement and within social movements as an educative element

History of institutions specifically devoted to adult education and those

in which adult education plays secondary of ancillary functions-- Development, growth, recreation, and demise.

Role of professional associations (including those relevant to other disciplines

Financing and legislative history

Role of foundations

History of Key Thinkers and others who may be unknown or lesser known

History of adult education both in and for specific groups (gender, racial, ethnic, special populations, etc.)

Contextual understanding such as specific historical eras and periods (which can be “stand alone” when the era is the focus, or part of any of the above areas).

How far have we progressed since the lament of Stubblefield (1982) and others about both the dearth of historical research in the field and the ahistorical nature of our literature in not taking into account the historical context of the claims? Have we been able to raise the antennae of others both within and outside the field as to the importance of understanding one’s history? Several decades ago Stubblefield (1982, pp. 6-11) generated seven categorical areas in which he saw historical research was needed at that time:

Institutions, configurations, and communities (acknowledging that the bulk of research rested here). This seem to still take center stage with wider variety and more small scale focused inquiries such as specific military institutions, the community of Native Americans of a specific area, the African American church, and others.

Individuals (recognizing that studies were not numerous, and heralding the “promising development” of educational biographies). This area is burgeoning as evidenced by the two volume set of proceedings from the 6th International Conference on the History of Adult Education in 1996 and the incidence of biographically oriented articles and dissertations focused on the contributions of a personage or their role as adult educator often long before that was a recognizable professional identity. Examples range from generally well known figures such as Alexander Meikeljohn, Julius Nyerere, Booker T. Washington and those well known to adult educators such as Malcolm Knowles, Paul Bergevin, to less well known individuals

such as educator and social visionary Honorine Hermelin Gronbech in Sweden, woman religious (sister) Catherine Pinkerton in Washington, D.C., Jane Farwell, adult educator and social recreation leader trainer, or individuals well known, but not previously studied through an adult education lens (such as Lucretia Mott Coffin, Margaret Fuller).

Interaction between individuals/groups and configurations of education. The interactional issue was the focus of the 7th International Conference on "The Rise and Fall of Adult Education Institutions and Social Movement," which was designed to explore "inter-relationships between the two.

Cultural Diffusion. With the advent of the internet both to reduce the distance between individuals, thus opening communication channels, and to facilitate access to research findings and other information offers a new world for continuing historical research in this arena is offered.

Adult education theory development and social practice. This category refers to historical studies that examine the genesis and development of how we have approached the development of theory and practice generally and in specific theoretical cases. I would add how the general body of knowledge as well as specific well quoted and accepted theories have taken root, who has given them credence and how and perhaps the issue of who cites whom and why. Actually, this area is related to "cultural diffusion" above: the academic, social, political, etc. aspect of knowledge diffusion.

Periodization. This category addressed the challenges of a periodization scheme of American adult education per se, but any historical research in studying a whole country can either work from existing periods as defined by cultural historians, political scientists, etc. or let periods emerge from the content of the study itself. More than a category of research, however, periodization becomes a methodological issue for all historical research and resonates with the path one chooses for any research endeavor: a priori categorizations or allowing the allowing them to emerge from the data. Ostensibly, the answer depends upon the purpose of the research and the question(s) asked.

Intellectual History. While this category was restricted to the ideas and ideologies about the education of adults, offering examples such as the idea of education extension or the idea of lifelong learning, intellectual history has a long lineage. The oasis for intellectual history has been the *Journal of the History of Ideas*.

Much research and action is often guided by, infused with, or starts with an idea. This aspect still seems missing from the kind of historical inquiries we have produced, or at minimum does not have a strong presence. Many ideas exist, however, which warrant further investigation from an historical perspective: For example, the history of the idea of empowerment. Questions such as when did it first enter the lexicon of adult educators, what conceptualizations are afforded the term, what are the various renditions and meanings with which it has been treated, how has it been used, and possibly misused and abused in theory as well as in practice? Lifelong learning is a term which has periodically been referred to as an idea. Particularly during the 1960s and 1970s one often heard the rally cry of lifelong learning being "an idea whose time had come." My own analysis of lifelong learning during the 1970s as an idea led me to ancient Greek and other philosophers who may not have conceived of themselves as "adult educators" but certainly form a central part of the history of the idea of lifelong learning. Socrates' Γνωθαι Σε αὐτόν (Know Thyself) is a very deep concept as is Βίος

Ἀνεξετάστος οὐ βίωτος ἐστίν (The Unexamined Life is not Worth Living), both of which are fundamental to the current research and practice of reflective thinking and reflective learning. Many other ideas beckon--ideas that are used not only in adult education, but are shared with other areas of study and practice. It would be of interest and behoove us to access other literature bases and dialogue with professionals in other areas to better understand the potential fullness of the idea. Empowerment was mentioned above; another idea ripe for inquiry is the idea of transformation.

Toward the Future

What we mean by historical research in adult education depends upon our conceptualization of adult education and how much we choose to stay exclusively within the boundaries of the recognized field or how much we are interested in exploring facets of the function of adult education as it manifests in other venues or by other professionals. Moreover, the meaning and meaningfulness that either of these approaches has for us as researchers will be of fundamental importance in motivating us. The possibilities, then, are wide-ranging. I have offered my preliminary analysis of what we already seem to have done well and some possible considerations for the future as a starter stimulus to catalyze discussion and dialogue. Onward

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