

Title: The Foundations of Adult Education in Canada

Author: Gordon Selman and Paul Dampier

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This entry is a review of the book.

Anyone who has ever taught or planned a program for adults, conducted research in this area or had an interest in the nature of the discipline has spent endless hours sorting through the maze of adult education literature looking for Canadian perspectives in this field. Finally, under one cover Selman and Dampier have provided us with a well constructed and amply documented volume that does justice to the lively adult education scene in Canada. The Foundations of Adult Education in Canada is a discussion of the unique characteristics of both the field of practice and the field of study with an emphasis on the most recent decades. As the title suggests, the authors describe the fundamentals of the enterprise - definitions, functions and philosophy, participation, program development, public policy and the contemporary scene. The book provides a rich and insightful explanation of "What is Canadian about Canadian adult education?".

Over the years adult education has been criticized for many things including its lack of precision in definition. Chapter 1 greets this criticism head on by describing the differences between the education of adults and adult education, clarifying the distinctions between related terms and outlining the broad categories pertinent to the organization of content in the field. For practitioners new to this subject, the imagery of the continuum in the section on the relationship of the learner to educational resources provides a foundation for understanding learner autonomy. Early in "Definitions and Boundaries", the authors explain that throughout the volume adult education is discussed on three different dimensions - as a set of activities, as an intellectual process in which adults seek to learn things and as a social system which is made up of individuals and organizations. However, the focus of the book is actually on the activity and social system phenomena.

Deciding how to make a philosophical foundations section inviting and practical to the reader is a challenge to any author. Selman and Dampier fair well on this count. Threaded through chapter 2 are examples of the functions which adult learning performs in the life of individuals in society as well as scenarios which are presented in the context of adult education to help the reader distinguish the philosophical perspectives. Although the two sections of "Functions and Philosophical Considerations" were written by two different pens, together they act as a backdrop for reflection on the practice of adult education. As the authors mention there is no sustained scholarship in these fields which as been produced in English speaking Canada and the section of the chapter on philosophical matters is hopefully the beginning of a new process. For those readers engaged in the terminology debate it may have been useful in this section to refer to the recent attempts to redefine andragogy as opposed to replying solely on Knowles' earlier formulations.

Each page of chapter 3 "The Canadian Movement in Context" colourfully describes the connection between Canada's historical experience as a nation and the form and content of adult education practice. After tracing the British and American influences on adult education in Canada, the authors outline a number of features of the Canadian experience and how outstanding Canadians responded to these challenges as a people by devising educational responses which met not only their own needs but in many instances had useful application abroad. If the message of the chapter is to leave the

reader with a sense that adult education is a reactive enterprise the authors have made their point.

One of the central ideas of chapters 4 and 5 relates to the concept of participation in adult learning as a cornerstone in the development of both the field and the discipline. In advancing this argument and promoting the fact that participation must be seen from more than one viewpoint, the authors intertwined the results of the Statistics Canada Adult Education Survey and Tough's efforts at quantifying participation in adult education. Although chapter 4 provides a concise overview of the motivational work of many respected adult educator's such as Verner, Houle, Knowles, Boshier, Cross and Rubenson, there is a mere mention of the methodological shortcomings of their contributions. For a discipline in development such as adult education, this type of information is crucial for both researchers and front-line workers for the advancement of new knowledge and innovative practice. In chapter 5 the authors creatively sketch out a selection of design elements in actual programs to illustrate how practitioners can learn from a developed program as well as the theoretical conception of program planning. A characteristic common to both chapters is the dynamic and purposeful quality of the adult education enterprise.

To set the stage for understanding the complexities of how governments and other agencies have accomplished national goals through adult education, chapter 6 presents a theoretical orientation to public policy and an analytical framework for policy formation. To help practitioners integrate this information an example of public policy formation favouring adult literacy is used as a case study. Because the case study was so illustrative an additional example may have been warranted. As well, the review section on international calls for public policy may have read better if it had been integrated with the international experiences section of the next chapter. Following the same theme, chapter 7 examines the policy situation within Canada relating to adult education. Specific provincial policies are outlined and prefaced with an insightful set of generalizations about the Canadian situation. This lucid review is based on one method of inquiry - the formal education system. It may have been instructive, as a companion section, to compare this policy situation of the formal education system with another publicly funded institution which provides adult education such as libraries or community centres.

The last three chapters speak to adult education as an emerging profession and field of practice which continues to "be many-faceted with many ideologies and points of view co-existing". A commonly asked question by graduate students seeking professional education in this field is "what can I do with a degree in adult education?". These last chapters address this issue in a very discernible manner. Chapter 8 "Adult Education as Discipline and Vocation" is a factual and tightly written discussion on the roles performed by adult educators, the development of professional associations, the growth of professional education programs and the expansion of research and publication activity. Chapter 9 "The Contemporary Scene and Future Prospects" serves as a summative statement drawing together many of the contemporary developments covered in earlier chapters and chapter 10 "Accessing the Literature" provides an overview of additional references and resources which correspond with the main themes covered in the book. What is missing in this last part of the text is a clear synthesis as to what the authors now view as a Canadian research agenda for the building of new knowledge and advancement of the discipline. Selman and Dampier have adequately described the volume of publications written about the field over the last decades but fall short in providing their informed opinion of the areas which require further rigorous investigation. For eager graduate students in adult education these reference points would have been useful in developing their own research programs.

The Foundations of Adult Education in Canada is a carefully researched and easily read resource book for students, academics, policy makers and persons interested in both observing and participating in the growth and change of a field of practice. It is a volume that fills a long neglected gap in Canadian adult education literature. However, there are three shortcomings in this travail. First, despite the fact that there is much discussion in the book on the instructional process of self directed learning, Selman and Dampier have not illuminated the more recent developments and instrumentation of the personality dimensions of continuing learners and brought us closer to a unified theory of the concept. A second limitation, already addressed by the authors, is that this account of the field does not present the picture of both language communities in Canada. This reader questioned whether adult education in English speaking and French speaking Canada really "functioned in two different worlds". Based on the description of activities and the social system of individuals and organizations in French speaking adult education which are mentioned throughout the volume, there appears to be similitude with English speaking developments as opposed to solitude. And thirdly, sections of the book are repetitious. Having used this text as one of the primary references for a foundational graduate course in adult education, I have found it to be an

indispensable tool describing an enterprise which has come of age.

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