

State of the Field Review of Adult Learning Research: a report on the theme areas

Jim Sharpe, Mount Saint Vincent University
May 26, 2006

In July 2005 the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) selected for the Adult Learning Knowledge Centre (ALKC) the consortium based at the College of Extended Learning, University of New Brunswick. At first meeting of the ALKC consortium on July 15, 2005, the Request for Proposals (RFP) from the CCL on “State of the Field Reviews” was discussed. As the deadline for the RFP was August 1st, the meeting decided that the ALKC consortium, as it lacked both staff and governing structure, did not have the ability to respond to the RFP, but a small group of consortium members would be encouraged to respond. In July, Jim Sharpe worked with Allan Quigley (literacy), H  l  ne Fournier (e-learning), Dorothy MacKeracher (barriers and access), Donovan Plumb (learning communities), Leona English (gender), Budd Hall (social movements) and Darlene Clover (culture) to develop a response to the RFP. The original proposal included Rodrigue Landry, Directeur, Institut canadien de recherche sur les minorit  s linguistiques at the Universit   de Moncton, to survey the theme of French as a minority language and adult learning but he withdrew from the review when a suitable researcher could not be identified.

In September 2005, the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) approved the “Adult Learning: State of the Field” proposal. The proposal called for the following:

- The most comprehensive state-of-the-field review ever compiled of adult learning within Canada;
- Reliable generalizations pointing to best practices and procedures in adult learning;
- The identification of the major knowledge and capacities gaps, together with related issues to inform future decisions concerning those gaps;
- The identification of promising lines of inquiry to address these gaps; and,
- The identification of strategies to promote and facilitate an improved exchange of knowledge among those involved in adult learning, and those in the public domain who potentially could be more involved in adult learning.

In December 2005, the first copies of the seven reports were forwarded to CCL. Copies were also distributed to members of the ALKC consortium for review. Charles Ungerleider, Director of Research for CCL, provided extensive comments on the first copies of the reports. In January 2006, the authors of the reports met by teleconference to discuss the response to the first reports. The authors agreed to revise the reports and to adopt a standard format as much as possible into their reports. The group also discussed validation of the reports by practitioners and researchers in the respective fields. It was agreed that the first symposium of the Adult Knowledge Learning Centre would focus on the discussion of the reports and developing strategies for dealing with the research gaps and promising lines of inquiry identified.

This review of research includes reports on seven theme areas of adult learning: literacy, culture, e-learning, gender, barriers and access, learning communities, and social movements. The reports will be published on the AKLC Symposium’s web site and summaries of the reports will be circulated to all who attend. This executive summary presents the common findings across the seven theme

areas, an analysis of gaps in the existing research and recommendations for promising programs of inquiry.

The common themes from the seven reports include the following:

Communities of practice

Many of the theme reports used the term communities of practice to describe three separate adult learning phenomena: communities or social movements that define learning needs and create knowledge to meet these needs; adult learning practitioners who develop shared practices and knowledge; and virtual and professional communities who through adult learning develop shared norms, procedures and values.

The diversity of adult learning

The theme reviews include reports of arts based inquiry, integration of electronic learning into the learning process, particular learning needs of rural women, demands of diverse populations for literacy, working across difference, and the need to develop adult learning theory which recognizes this diversity.

Community based research

The theme reviews report on the need for the development of research skills among practitioners and community based organizations, the development of participatory action research, and community arts based inquiry.

University-community research alliances

The reviews report on various academic-community joint research projects such as the SSHRC CURA program, feminist models of community research, literacy practitioner research and partnership models for research.

Gaps in the adult learning literature include the following:

1. need for the development of social-cultural learning theory
2. need for documentation of existing community based learning programs
3. documentation of adult learning outcomes (social cohesion, civic engagement) beyond testing of individual achievement
4. analysis of the conflicting assumptions, goals and intentions between learners, learning institutions and funding agencies.
5. development of websites and portals on adult learning for both researchers and learners
6. research on the effectiveness of public learning programs

Promising areas for inquiry include:

1. integration of e-learning technology into adult learning processes
2. impact of community based research on policy making processes
3. supports for adult learners
4. formation of research working groups on theme areas and research gaps
5. social-cultural adult learning outcomes
6. arts based community research
7. development of social cultural learning theory

The purpose of this survey is to start a conversation on the current state of research on adult learning and a discussion on the future directions for this research. Through the work of the Adult Learning Knowledge Centre further validation of these research findings is being planned. As well a national symposium on “The State of the Field of Adult Learning in Canada” will be held to discuss these reports and provide direction to further work of CCL on research, knowledge dissemination and public discussion of adult learning.

Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge the commitment, hard work and persistence of all the theme area research leaders, the researchers and the support staff who made this review possible. The work was undertaken with the support of the Canadian Council on Learning, which bears no responsibility for its content.