

THE EMERGENCE OF ADULT EDUCATION AS A FIELD OF STUDY: SOME CRITICAL QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS ¹

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Introduction

Adult education is as old as human civilisation itself and has served countless individual and collective purposes. Historically, however, it has often emerged in periods of tension and crisis ¹. and it is possible to identify two opposing forces which have sustained collective efforts to organise the education of adults. Thus on the one hand adult education has frequently been associated with the efforts of dominant or ruling groups to maintain or extend their hegemony over subordinate peoples and classes. While on the other hand it has also been associated with the efforts of groups to challenge or transform the existing social order. Despite the rhetoric to the contrary, adult education may be used as readily as an instrument to divert subordinate groups from direct action and to legitimate unequal relationships of ownership and control, as it may be an instrument of emancipation and democratization.

This is not to suggest that any form or practice of adult education can cursorily be identified as hegemonic or counter-hegemonic. The world of social action is far too complex to be so simply encapsulated. Just as crises and tensions give rise to adult education programmes and movements, so are contradictions and tensions contained within them. It thus becomes necessary to analyse any specific form or practice of adult education within its historical and social context in order to identify the often contradictory forces, pressures and ideologies operating upon and within it.

Adult education, like other fields of university study such as Law, Engineering, Medicine and Social Work, has not emerged in a *social* vacuum. It is the product of particular historical and social circumstances, and its emergence as a field of study at some universities and not at others must be accounted for in terms of the pressures operating upon and within the various institutions together with the success or failure of specific theoretical formulations (or legitimating ideologies) to justify the field within a framework which is acceptable to client groups and to the institution.

Despite or perhaps because of its rapid growth in recent years the future of adult education as a field of university study is still uncertain. In South Africa in particular it is an extremely new field and universities at the present time are at a critical stage of planning future directions. In view of this I shall attempt in this paper to identify some of the pressures which have stimulated and inhibited the development of adult education as a field of study. I shall then discuss several intellectual traditions of

¹ A chapter in a book edited by D. Freer & P. Randall *Educating the Educators* (pp. 113-132). Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand, 1982.

adult education and two of the most influential theoretical frameworks which have been developed in an attempt to create a sense of unity and direction for the field. In the light of this I shall examine some of the pressures driving adult education towards a narrow technocratic and functionalist interpretation of its role. It will be argued that if those engaged in university teaching and research in adult education wish to maintain and extend the humanist, liberal and radical tradition of the field, it will be necessary for them to acknowledge the pressures on them and take a number of steps to counter these pressures.

Pressure Stimulating and Inhibiting the Emergence of Adult Education as a Field of Study

There are a number of characteristics of adult education which tend to fragment the field and inhibit its development as a coherent field of university study and professional practice. One of these is the fact referred to previously that it frequently arises out of contradictory and opposing forces. In capitalist societies socialists have historically been deeply suspicious of university involvement in adult education², and authoritarian Governments have shown an equal degree of suspicion of university involvement³ except in professional continuing- education and in a narrowly conceived field which would focus on the improvement of methods and techniques for training and retraining adults.

A further characteristic of the field is that adult education practitioners are scattered across a wide range of groups and institutions in society. Many of these practitioners identify closely with their own groups or institutions or with other professional associations. Many have little or no sense of identification with other adult educators, seeing their commitments or career-paths as lying within these groups, institutions or associations.

Moreover the amateur tradition in adult education is a strong one, and the number of full-time paid adult educators has until relatively recently been small, with the vast majority of practitioners engaged in part-time or sporadic or voluntary work in the field⁴. The strength of these forces of fragmentation is reflected within the universities. Courses containing significant adult education components may be found in any or all of the following schools, departments or institutes: Agriculture, Business Studies, Public Administration, Development Studies, Labour Studies, Education, Medicine, Librarianship, Social Work and Psychology as well as in Departments or Institutes of Adult Education. Thus it has not been uncommon in the past to find that several departments within the same university were teaching similar courses without those departments or the staff involved being aware of the similarities and possible duplications.

Increasingly however throughout the 20th century the forces drawing together the various specialised areas and diverse ideologies contained within the field of adult education have been gathering 'momentum'. In socialist societies governments have placed a high priority on the development of a

comprehensive approach to adult education integrating it within overall development plans. Governments have invested heavily in a range of programmes including literacy and ABE, agricultural and industrial training and retraining, health education and political education. In order to implement these programmes the training and retraining of large numbers of adult educators has been necessary and universities and other tertiary educational institutions became involved in providing training programmes and in research in the field of adult education.

In several capitalist countries of Europe and North America unity within the field of adult education was sought initially during the first three decades of this century within a common attachment to a liberal and democratic ideal. In the UK in particular universities became directly involved in providing liberal adult education programmes, which were seen by governments and by the adult education movement as of vital importance in the maintenance and extension of democratic institutions and processes. The attempt to develop unity in the field of adult education in capitalist societies on the basis of an independent socialist or a liberal academic approach never took root in America. In the USA and increasingly in the UK and Europe adult education has developed in response to specific problems, tensions and crises. Difficulties faced by American agriculture in the early years of this century saw the emergence of the Co-operative Extension Service - the largest employer of adult educators in North America, and the response of the Federal Government to the Depression of the 1930s included a significant adult education programme. With the emergence of welfare capitalism and the increasing tensions and contradictions in most capitalist societies over the past 30 years, governments have invested heavily in a variety of forms of adult education ranging from adult basic education and community education and development to industrial training and retraining, trade union education and professional continuing education, and this in turn has placed pressure on universities and other tertiary institutions to provide training for the increasing number of people who are in some form of adult education.

In many Third World societies similar trends occurred. Until the late 1960s investment in adult education was minimal. Development funds were channelled into projects which were likely to stimulate economic growth measured in terms of per capita GNP and funds for education were largely absorbed by the development of formal educational systems modelled on those of the metropolitan countries. By the late-1960s it had become abundantly apparent to those concerned with development, that existing policies had failed to affect the plight of the poorest 40% of the population of most Third World countries. Indeed their situation may even have worsened during the 1950s and 1960s. Governments and International Development Agencies began to invest in non-formal and adult education programmes linking them closely with programmes of health and nutrition, housing,

community development and land reform. These developments not only required an increasing number of adult education specialists but equally important, made it necessary for people involved in a wide range of activities to receive some training in adult education. And once again universities were drawn into providing training programmes for these people.

The responses by universities to these pressures have been many and varied. They have reflected on the one hand the strengths and traditions of the institutions and on the other the nature and sources of the pressures for the introduction of courses. However throughout the world there has been a steady trend within universities for the emergence of strong adult education units. These units are committed to research and to the development of adult education as a field of study. In addition to their undergraduate, postgraduate and in-service teaching, they have also increasingly provided service courses for other sections of the university.

It is interesting to note that although adult education first emerged as a field of university studies in Europe and North America it is in several Third World Universities and in those European and North American universities with close links with Third World countries that the consolidation of strong adult education units has most readily been accomplished⁵. The reasons for this are not hard to find. They relate to the newness of the universities themselves, the need to rationalise the use of scarce teaching resources, and above all the need to integrate adult education within broader national development strategies.

Intellectual Traditions and Theories of Adult Education

As adult education has emerged as a field of university study and professional practice university teachers and practitioners have sought to develop theoretical frameworks which would give a sense of unity and direction to their teaching and provide a focus for research. In doing this adult educators have drawn on a wide range of intellectual traditions.

One of the earliest of these traditions is based in a radical critique of capitalist society. It grew out of the engagement of intellectuals in the revolutionary struggles of the working class. Within the mainstream of university teaching and research in adult education in capitalist societies this tradition has not been a strong one. However under the influence of Paulo Freire⁶ and the revival of academic Marxism in recent years adult educators have been forced to re-examine their approach to the field. This tradition argues that the forms and practices of adult education can only be understood by locating them within their structural and historical contexts, that adult education cannot be a neutral process - it constitutes either a process of domestication or of liberation, and that historically adult education has been largely a middle class activity serving the interests of the oppressors rather than the interests of the oppressed. It

therefore calls on adult educators to commit themselves to the liberation of the oppressed and to develop forms and practices of adult education from within a context of revolutionary action.

A second and stronger tradition is based in the liberal view that adult education is a powerful instrument of social and political reform and that it has a major role to play in the maintenance and extension of democracy. There are several contrasting strands within this tradition. One strand arose out of the 'Great Tradition' of liberal non-vocational adult education established in Britain in the early years of this Century. Robert Peers, appointed in 1921 to the first Chair of Adult Education at the University of Nottingham, writing in the 1950s saw it as " ... the business of university departments of adult education .. not merely to plan and organise programmes of adult education, but also to advance the study of adult education, its history, organisation, methods and purposes, and by diffusing the resulting knowledge and ideas among others, to bring fresh inspiration into a movement which otherwise, by the process of expansion, may be in danger of losing its early ideals" 7.

And what were these 'early ideals' that Peers argued should continue to bring fresh inspiration to the movement? They included a deep commitment to social and political reform through education and a belief in the power of knowledge to bring about a better and more just society. They also included a belief in voluntarism, a deep respect for the autonomy of the individual and a belief that ordinary men and women, given the appropriate opportunities, have both the drive and the capacity to develop their powers of reason, to extend their knowledge and their sensitivities for the good of all.

A second strand, which may be traced back to John Dewey 8 and Eduard Lindeman 9, shares much in common with the first. However, whereas the former stresses a sense of history, the growth of intellectual understanding by the individual through class discussion, and nonvocational ideals, the latter stresses that "... the approach to adult education will be via the route of situations, not subjects." 10 It stresses the processes of group problem-solving through "creative discussion". It argues that "education is life" "and thus rejects the distinction between vocational and non-vocational education and argues that "The resource of highest value in adult education is the learner's experience" not the lecturer, tutor or book. This strand of thought has given rise to many forms and practices of adult education. Participatory planning, experiential learning, group dynamics and some forms of community development derive many of their principles from this pragmatic strand of liberal thought, and many adult educators see the defining characteristics and principles of the field as arising out of this tradition.

A third Tradition is based in the existentialist and humanist thought of the 20th Century. Philosophers and writers such as Heidegger 12, Sartre 13 and Buber 14 and psychologists such as Maslow 15 and Rogers 16 have had a powerful influence on the emergence of adult education as a field of study. Within an increasingly secularised and fragmented world, adult education is seen as a powerful

humanising agency enabling the individual to preserve her identity in the face of social pressure to conform, and to attain authenticity through the mutual recognition and acceptance of free individuals in open and non-judgmental communication with one another. Maslow's wholist view of personality and motivation, his emphasis on the adult years as a period of potential growth and his hierarchical conception of human needs have provided an influential framework for the legitimation and analysis of a variety of forms and practices of adult education, and Rogers' view of learning, which stresses meaningfulness, self-directedness, personal involvement and the importance of learning being incorporated within the total experience of the individual and his view of the teacher as a non-directive facilitator and enabler, as a participant learner and as a flexible resource person and guide to other learning resources has provided a framework of practice for a field which has historically rejected the conception of the teacher as authority. This tradition has also contributed much to the development of several forms of adult education including experiential learning approaches, group dynamics and the encounter group movement.

A fourth approach is one which grew out of the development of force field analysis by Kurt Lewin¹⁷ in the 1930s and 1940s, which in the hands of 18 his disciples came to be identified as change theory. It shares with the pragmatic liberals a concern for democratic processes and a focus on the individual in her environment. It also shares with the humanists a wholistic view of personality and motivation and a certain a-historicism. In addition it shares with the final approaches still to be discussed a concern with the analysis of total systems. As its name implies change theory is centrally concerned with conceptualising change and developing strategies for system change. Planned change is conceptualised in terms of a 3-step model which requires the 'unfreezing' of existing attitudes or behaviour, the introduction of the changes and then the 'refreezing' of the new attitudes or behaviours. To bring about change, whether it be at the individual, group, organizational or community level, it is necessary firstly to identify a desired goal, secondly to identify the nature and intensity of all the forces operating in the situation to promote or restrain system movement to attain the goal, thirdly to develop strategies for strengthening positive' and weakening 'negative' forces, and finally to ensure once the goal has been attained that the balance of forces is maintained. Change theorists have developed an increasingly sophisticated set of techniques, methods and procedures which have had particular relevance within organisational contexts and which have resulted in the emergence of a corp of professional adult educators who have defined their roles as change agents, organisation development specialists or specialists in human resource development.

A fifth approach has its roots in the work of Frederick Taylor¹⁹, the so-called founder of 'scientific management' in the latter part of the 19th Century, which was based in the drive toward greater

efficiency and productivity and the systematic application of empirical methods of inquiry to the analysis of tasks in the work situation. In one of its modern forms, namely systems analysis²⁰ this approach is applied to the planning and management of large-scale education and training programmes. Systems analysis essentially involves the application of mathematical models to the development of the sequences of actions necessary for the efficient planning, execution and evaluation of programmes.

Whereas systems analysis finds its applications primarily within the context of large--scale educational campaigns and large education and training systems and hence has had limited influence on the field of adult education as a whole the final approach to be mentioned briefly here, namely that based on behavioural psychology, has had a pervasive and direct influence on a vast range of forms and practices of education and not least upon adult education. The behavioural psychology approach, which is particularly associated with the work of B.F. Skinner²¹ is based in a similar positivist and empiricist tradition to that of the previous approach discussed. It is thus committed to the systematic application of empirical methods of inquiry to the analysis of human behaviour. All forms of action and knowledge are reducible to observable behaviours, and since behaviour is determined by its consequences, changes in behaviour i.e. learning, can only be achieved by changing the consequences of behaviour. The task of teaching thus becomes one of arranging the appropriate. behavioural consequences or contingencies of reinforcement on the basis of objectives that are specified in advance in behavioural or performance terms. This approach then, holds out the promise of the development of a technology of teaching and behavioural management and control which may be applied to a wide range of situations and for a wide range of purposes.

In responding to the pressures to develop courses and research programmes in adult education some university teachers have located themselves within one or other of the intellectual traditions discussed previously and have ignored the existence of alternative Traditions. Others in pragmatic fashion have introduced students to all the traditions and approaches and have left it to them to resolve the tensions and contradictions between the approaches. There are some however who have deliberately sought to develop a sense of unity and direction for the field of adult education. Two people have been especially influential. The one is Cyril Houle, formerly professor of education and the University of Chicago who has probably been the most influential person in the emergence of adult education as a field of graduate study and research over the past thirty years throughout much of the western world. He defines adult education as "... the process by which men and women (alone, in groups or in institutional settings) seek to improve themselves or their society by increasing their skill, knowledge or sensitiveness; or it is any process by which individuals, groups, or institutions try to help men and women improve in these ways"²². He then proceeds to develop on the basis of this definition, together with a number of

assumptions about the nature of education, a "fundamental system of practice of the field .. (which is) discerned by probing beneath many different surface realities to identify a basic unity of process"²³.

This system is based firstly on a typology of educational situations differentiated from one another in terms of the source of authority and control operating in the situation and secondly on a framework of interacting components and decision points contained within the programme development process. This system, he hopes, will provide a foundation upon which those engaged in adult education may build a common body of knowledge which will transcend differences in philosophies, personal values and institutional loyalties.

If Houle has been the most influential person in attempting to develop a new discipline of adult education, Malcolm Knowles, formerly executive director of the Adult Education Association of the USA and professor of education at Boston University has probably been the most influential figure in the emergence of adult education as a field of professional practice. He borrowed the word 'andragogy' from Yugoslavia to refer to "... the art and science of helping adults learn" ²⁴ which he contrasted with pedagogy which he refers to as "the art and science of teaching children". ²⁵ He bases this distinction on four assumptions about the differences between childhood and adulthood The self-concept of the adult is different from that of a child. As people mature their self-concept changes from one of dependence to one of independence or self-directedness; the reservoir of experience which the adult brings to the learning situation is greater than that brought by the child; The developmental tasks faced by the adult are different from those of the child and the bases are somewhat different; The adult approaches learning with a time perspective that is different from that of children. On the basis of these assumptions he argues that a new technology is emerging designed to help adults learn. In developing this new technology he does not see adult education as being limited to any single intellectual or philosophical tradition. On the contrary he himself draws pragmatically on several of the traditions and approaches which we discussed earlier and he sees the unity of the field of adult education emerging from the development of an increasingly sophisticated technology for helping adults learn.

Knowles' theory has been attractive to many university adult educators for a variety of reasons. His brand of pragmatic humanism has reflected an influential strand of intellectual thought in recent years and his focus on the distinctive characteristics of adults as learners has given the field a sense of unity and a legitimating framework. Whatever their ideological and institutional differences adult educators share a common interest in the adult learner, and Knowles' framework holds out the promise of a technology of adult education based on an evolving understanding of the characteristics of the adult learner which may be applied by adult educators within a wide range of contexts.

Houle's theory has been attractive for some similar and some different reasons. Rather than stressing

the differences between adult and child learners Houle has sought to stress the similarities in the educational process throughout the life-span of the individual. Thus he grounds his theory within the tradition of general educational theory going back to Ralph Tyler²⁶ and John Dewey. However he has tried to broaden the basis of this tradition, to remove the emphasis on the school and institutional education and to take into account the fluidity of the process of adult education and the diversity of situations in which it takes place. Houle has thus sought to provide adult education with a sense of direction and a legitimating framework from within the field of general educational theory. He has thus held out the promise of an emerging discipline of adult education which, while based within general educational theory, would also be based in the characteristic which distinguishes it from most traditional education viz. the richness and diversity of the situations within which adult education takes place.

The weaknesses of both of these attempts to provide a sense of unity and direction to the field of adult education arise out of their very strengths. Precisely because both seek to provide this sense of unity between frequently warring factions and traditions, both serve also to mask the political and ideological dimensions of all education. Knowles assumes the neutrality of adult education technology and Houle despite his recognition of the diversity of purposes, assumes the benignity of the educational process. In addition, precisely because both seek to ground adult education within a universalistic frame of reference, based in the case of Knowles on a set of assumptions about the characteristics of adult learners and in the case of Houle on a typology of educational design situations both serve to inhibit an analysis of the unique historical, cultural and social contexts and traditions within which adult education forms and practices emerge.

Finally, precisely because both approaches seek to develop consensus among adult educators, both tend to assume a consensual model of society, an evolutionary model of social change and a cooperative model of educational processes. Both approaches then serve to inhibit educational analysis and action based on a conflict model of society, a revolutionary model of social change or a contested or conflictual model of educational processes.

We have seen that universities have responded in diverse ways to the varied pressures to develop teaching programmes and research in the field of adult education. These include the fragmentary and functional responses of professional schools and departments in developing courses which will provide their students with the educational skills and competencies necessary for them to function effectively within their professional contexts. They also include the kind of response which results in the establishment of a department or institute of adult education which seeks to develop adult education as a field of study in its own right.

The establishment of such departments and the acceptance by the universities of adult education as a

field of study in its own right may be interpreted as a first step in the rejection of a narrow, functionalist view of adult education. However in itself it is not sufficient to ensure that adult education, curricula and research will be both broadly based and will take up the challenge to examine critically not only the micro-processes, procedures, techniques and methods of adult education but also the social, economic and political contexts @thin which adult education forms and practices are located.

For, as we have seen, the attempts by at least two adult educators to develop theoretical frameworks which would provide a sense of unity and direction for the field of adult education as a whole, have both served to divert attention from those problematic and potentially divisive issues which relate adult education to the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces in society and from an examination of these forces as they operate upon and within the various forms and practices of adult education.

It is not difficult to understand why this should happen. Firstly, governments, employers and prospective employers of adult educators do not look kindly on their agents of development or their trainers or administrators of training programmes raising critical questions about the assumptions underlying the policies upon which these programmes are based. What they look for is increased effectiveness on the part of their employees or future employees.

Secondly, the majority of the adult education students themselves will be looking for functional skills and competencies. Many of them are mature students, frequently already in education, training or development jobs, who are seeking to improve their competence and increase their confidence in performing their functions or who are seeking certification to increase their value in the labour market. Many of these students are inevitably reluctant to face those wider issues which may raise difficult questions about the very functions which they are committed to perform.

Thirdly, university staff themselves are subject to all kinds of pressures to avoid confronting many of the most problematic questions. Within the universities, adult education is still a fledgling field of study and is still relatively low in the academic pecking order. The pressures are thus on staff to conform with traditional university teaching practices and to produce research that conforms with dominant conceptions of social science research. The taking of risks in this situation can be costly. Funds and personal prestige are more readily gained for research on problems that are identified by governments and large employers than they are for problems and issues identified by the least powerful groups within the community.

Conclusion

What then can universities and university adult educators do to ensure that their curricula and research do not become ensnared within a narrow, functionalist and technocratic model of adult education which

serves with uncritical obedience the interests of dominant institutions and authorities in society?

I believe that the first and most important step to take is for university adult educators themselves, together with university administrators and colleagues in related fields, to become aware of the hegemonic forces operating within and upon adult education and the universities. For, unless we become aware of these forces and of the ways in which they affect decisions in curriculum development and research, we cannot make independent decisions to accept or resist them.

This carries major implications for the development and selection of theory to guide our teaching and research. For if we adopt a theoretical framework which assumes the functionality of adult education or which assumes certain universalistic principles of adult education our attention may readily be diverted from the task of reflecting on and interpreting forms and practices of adult education in the light of the conflicts and tensions contained within their historical and social contexts.

Secondly it seems inevitable that university adult educators will be drawn into the practical world of adult education. In an indirect way this will happen through the supervision of student projects. However in a more direct way they will be called on to give evidence to commissions, to act as consultants and to serve on working parties and committees and they may wish to develop their own action-research or curriculum development projects. All this is well and good. Without these wider links the teaching of adult education in the universities would soon become sterile. Nevertheless, this wider engagement raises two important questions: With whom should such engagement take place? And what should be the terms of the engagement? Our response to the first question might be that we should engage with any individuals, groups and institutions that are interested or involved in adult education or who wish to obtain academic and professional help. Such an answer is, however, too simple: there are inevitably choices to be made and these choices will inevitably reflect to some degree the values of the individuals involved. Nevertheless it is important to make these choices in the full realisation of the pressures that operate upon us. The attractions of engaging with the dominant institutions and groups in society are considerable. Thus one may extend one's academic and professional career and extend the influence and increase the status of adult education. In addition one may hope to influence the processes of social change. On the other hand there are few incentives for university adult educators to engage with groups and movements of the exploited and subordinate sections of society. And yet I believe that if adult education is to assert its independence it is very important for us to engage with such groups. As Eddie Webster has pointed out: "The dominant institutions of our society assert constant pressure to define in their terms the questions intellectuals ask ... In the absence of real links with the working class and the wider communities outside the universities, it is very difficult to resist

such pressures." 27

The response to the second question is even more problematical than the first. Is it possible for the university adult educator to retain an uncommitted 'neutral' or objective-stance in the midst of conflicting forces? The answer of the liberal must be 'yes', that one may engage with any groups in society and perhaps especially with those of the oppressed and exploited, but one must do so on one's own terms, and these terms include a commitment to the pursuit of truth and to the asking of critical questions regardless of the consequences.

My own response is to suggest that this is but a partial answer, that the 'pursuit of truth' is a social action and that the theories which we adopt (implicitly or explicitly) and the questions which we ask all arise out of or assume an orientation or stance towards the conflicting forces. Academics, like everyone else in society, are engaged in their everyday lives in actions which maintain or oppose the existing hegemony. The newspapers which we read, the kinds of issues which we discuss with friends and colleagues and the associations which we join all influence the kinds of questions which we are likely to ask and the ways in which we formulate these questions within our academic contexts.

It seems to me that unless we have friends whom we can trust and who can trust us from among those members of the oppressed in our society who are committed to counter hegemonic action, unless we read the same newspapers, become concerned about the same problems, become involved in the same groups and associations and become committed to the same programmes of action in our everyday lives, it will be extremely difficult if not impossible to ask the kinds of questions which arise out of that frame of reference within our academic contexts. This is not to suggest that university adult educators should abrogate their responsibility to pursue truth or to ask critical question; rather it is to snidest that there are many shades of truth and many forms of critical questions and that these shades of truth and meaning and that these questions grow out of different experiences and different contexts.

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