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Reflections on the Profession and Professionalization of Adult Education

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The rich and varied field of adult education is difficult to categorize. Lately, my faculty colleagues at the University of Georgia and I have been debating "what is the definition of adult education?" This is a particularly challenging question in an age of uncertainty. During one of these discussions, one faculty member asked, "why do we have to define it?" Certainly there is power inherent in stating a formal definition: it excludes things and people. Yet, through these conversations, we decided that indeed it is our responsibility to define "it." We owe definition to our students who are engaged in adult education research and practice as those who will inherit the field as practitioners and scholars and redefine it for the future. We are accountable to our institution to validate our existence. We are obligated to the field, particularly when adult education's marginalization threatens programs and services. And, finally, we owe definition to adult educators who, whether they realize it or not, are engaged in the enterprise of supporting and facilitating adult learning in its myriad dimensions.

The purpose of this article is to raise questions about the profession and professionalization of adult education. It addresses such questions as "Who is the adult educator?" "What is adult education's vision?" "Where does adult education happen?" "How does marginalization impact adult education?" "What is the identity of an adult educator?" "What are the considerations related to professionalization?"

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Who Is The "Adult Educator"?

I call myself an "adult educator," but that may not be what you mean when you call yourself one. For me, the title captures my work as a university professor, whose arenas of practice and research span higher education, human resource development, consulting, continuing professional education, and community service. Your identity as an "adult educator" may mean that you are a literacy teacher, continuing education instructor, continuing professional educator, labor educator, non-profit staff, instructional designer, human resource developer, K-12 educator, corporate trainer, higher education administrator, extension agent, prison educator, organization development consultant, college professor, career development counselor, community activist, health educator, public official, or something else. The scope of adult education is daunting in its many forms and contexts, making our work challenging to categorize.

The varied practice of adult education sets up the reality that what I mean by referring to myself as an "adult educator" may not necessarily be what you mean. Or, you may not even consider yourself an "adult educator." Still others may reject the idea that I work across the fields of adult education and human resource development, charging that HRD is incompatible with adult education's commitment to social justice. I do not find such rigid categorizing of the field realistic and take an inclusive approach to integrating multiple disciplines as I define, practice, and teach adult education.

Some distinguish between adult educators and educators of adults (Griffith, 1989; Merriam & Brockett, 2007). Griffith defines *educators of adults* as those concerned with specific and practical educational goals in comparison to *adult educators* who hold a vision for the field that includes professionalization, academic programs, and interest in a collaborative field. Brockett (1991) differentiates between adult educators and those who conduct adult education. Brockett suggests by his definition that people may deliver adult education yet not posses any formalized training or professional affiliation in adult education. Brockett describes these distinct practitioners of adult education as working in parallel rather than hierarchically. This pattern of parallel practice has exacerbated the field's fragmentation. Just as "adult educators" are diverse, so too is its vision.

What is Adult Education's Vision?

Adult education has been defined as "activities intentionally designed for the purpose of bringing about learning among those whose age, social roles, or self-perception define them as adults" (Merriam & Brockett, 2007, p. 8). Adult education is a varied enterprise, with multiple goals and contexts. A field's boundaries "…are held strongly in place by theoretical premises, philosophical foundations, language, the practice arena, and the codification of knowledge in graduate programs" (Jeris & Daley, 2004, p. 101). Defining adult education's vision and boundaries becomes contested when we identify its various subfields, locate philosophical roots, debate ideology, seek definitions, and both set and resist boundaries (Jeris & Daley, 2004). Examining and crossing these boundaries demands critical reflection and stamina. Jeris and Daley (2004) suggest that as we learn to boundary span it is important to ask how we develop boundaries, recognize their parameters, and can stretch beyond them. Given the range of the field, we will be well served in adult education to learn to expand our boundaries.

The numerous boundaries of adult education range from complimentary to contested. The explicit social change agenda of programs such as that of The Highlander Center is a stark contrast to continuing professional education aimed at individual compliance with legislation or policy. Teaching someone to read is a more individualized process than educating to inspire a social movement such as the civil rights movement or women's liberation. Corporate training and development may embrace different goals and values than environmental activism. The various types of adult education listed above are weakly threaded together to form a "profession" of adult education that has become highly fragmented and decentralized. Many boundaries exist in adult education and an immediate and future challenge is to see if the field can span them to create a stronger, more unified field of adult education (Bierema, 2010, p. 144).

Roth (2004), assessing boundaries in adult education observes that they have evolved "at arm's length from one another. Historically, scholars from both camps have been content to fertilize within fenced-in yards rather than explore and nurture common ground" (p. 9). Heaney (2000) contends that the numerous social visions sought by adult educators are

complicated and often contradictory. He provides some examples of "fenced-in yards" such as literacy workers who seek to help individuals improve their job mobility while others seek to create shifts in social class, or corporate trainers who help implement organization goals while other educators teach worker's to resist management, or military educators versus peace educators.   Heaney asks how can adult education create a vision without conflict in purposes? He notes that the field is divided and that puts us at risk:

> An adult education practice that, despite a multiplicity of visions, does not engender strategies for action across the borders of our now divided terrain is destined to reproduce uncritically and indiscriminately both the best and the worst of the world's conditions. (p. 570)

Daley (2006) illustrates how adult education operates in parallel universes, failing to cross borders or share vision, in her writing about adult education and health promotion. She laments that both miss out on what each field has to offer in terms of theory and practice and our ability to create healthy communities suffers as a consequence. The problem Daley raises is not unique to health promotion, but rather common across the various sub-fields of adult education such as continuing professional education (CPE), literacy, higher education, human resource development (HRD), and so forth. Daley suggests that health promotion models provide guides for adult educators on working collaboratively with health education professionals to create healthy communities. She advocates more alignment in the areas of program planning, teaching and learning, and research. Daley's example is very useful across the various domains of adult education and range of adult educators. Given that adult education has so much parallel activity, it will be important to cultivate more communication and collaboration between these parallel entities if we are to create a stronger sense of professional identity.

Although there are many operating visions in adult education, what unifies us? What prevents us from crossing the many borders to see what we can learn? Examining boundaries, especially contested ones, unlocks the possibility for joint theory development and improved practice. When we understand where boundaries intersect, we can get closer to making changes in theory and practice and strengthen the vision for the field of adult education.

Where Does Adult Education Happen?

Adult education takes many forms, yet most of it can be categorized into three broad delivery systems including institutional, content area, and personnel (Merriam & Brockett, 2007). These delivery systems create boundaries throughout the field. The institutional providers include independent adult education organizations, educational institutions, quasieducational organizations, and noneducational organizations. *Independent adult education organizations* provide adult education as their main focus. These institutions can be community-based (learning exchanges and grassroots organizations) or private (Literacy Volunteers of America) or proprietary schools and residential centers such as the Highlander Center for Research and Education. *Educational institutions* include public schools and postsecondary institutions serving youth as their main mission. Many adult learners find themselves attending postsecondary institutions. Cooperative Extension Service also falls into this category. Unfortunately, both adult education and adult learners are marginalized in post-secondary institutions, even though their numbers are growing, especially in higher education. *Quasieducational organizations* can be private or public and view education as an important part of their mission. This category incorporates libraries, museums, mass media, community organizations, religious organizations and so forth. *Noneducational organizations* are similar to quasieducational organizations but do not include education as a primary part of their mission. Much of the education that happens in business and industry would fall into this category, and the workplace continues to be one of the largest providers of adult education with 2006 training expenditures estimated by ASTD to be nearly $130 billion (Workforce Management, 2008). Merriam and Brockett also identify content areas of adult education noting that the various delivery systems overlap. Major content areas of adult education include human resource development, continuing professional education, remedial or basic skills education, recreational or leisure learning, citizenship and technology. Each of these areas has created its own set of professional boundaries, some crossed more readily than others. The third major delivery system of adult education is personnel: those who deliver and receive adult education. Houle's (1970) pyramid of leadership provides a useful metaphor of adult education's delivery personnel with volunteers on the bottom followed by part-time instructors in the

middle, finishing with full-time adult educators such as program administrators, professors, training directors, and cooperative extension staff at the top. Each level of personnel likely identifies differently with the field. The range of institutions, content, and personnel involved in the delivery of adult education makes developing both an individual and collective sense of professional identity challenging.

How Does Marginalization Impact Adult Education?

The disjointed field of adult education is confounded by its marginal status. "Marginalization occurs when one person's views are valued and voiced at the sociopolitical and historical expense of others" (Sheared, 1994, p. 27). Sheared (2006) contrasts marginality to the "center." The center represents the dominant, inside group (often Euro-American heterosexual males) that controls access to resources such as ideology, information, and assets, as well as influence over the politics affecting them. Adult education has long sought to diminish or eradicate marginality in society and views education as a key variable in bringing more power to oppressed groups. Ironically, it is just this commitment to social justice that positions adult education on the margins since a social justice orientation involves interrogating dominant systems of power and privilege. Adult education programs are also marginalized due to diffuse purposes, the service orientation of the field, lack of funding, and the tenuous tie of learners to the provider organizations (Clark, 1956). Adults, by virtue of being of "non-traditional age" in many institutions may find themselves in settings where they are invisible and unconsidered.

Marginalization in adult education often manifests socially and institutionally. Social marginalization is based on not being in the center group due to sociological factors or positionalities such as gender, race, class, and so forth. Institutional marginalization is how the structure of organizations and delivery systems of adult education often function to disadvantage it. Clark (1956) observes:

> The adult program is a separate, periphery activity, and its clientele completely outside the compulsory attendance age groups. When an adult education program is initiated, it must make its way within a family of established programs, contending with the strong, central departments for budget support and favorable treatment. (p. 58)

Most adult education programs are housed in institutions that do not

view adult education as their primary mission. This is true for example in postsecondary institutions or businesses. This problem is further complicated by the reality that adult education programs are often funded based on enrollment (Merriam & Brockett, 2007, p. 110). Adult education's marginality also contributes to problems of identity since many adult education providers do not view themselves as such. Merriam and Brockett (2007) suggest that the field has emphasized the growth of institutional sponsorship and the development of formal programs, dominated by White, middle class males and a drive toward workplace education. A result of this development has been the field's loss of important segments of practice such as women's education, civil rights movements, immigrant and labor education, and others. Both social and institutional marginalization impinge the field's ability to influence education and cultivate a unified sense of professional identity.

What Is The Identity of an Adult Educator?

Given the challenges of identifying adult educators, the lack of a unifying vision, understanding the many contexts where adult education takes place, and considering how marginalization impinges the work of adult education, pinpointing an adult educator identity may be difficult.

When people learn I am an adult educator, they often react with a look of puzzlement. Most people outside our field have never heard of "adult education." Those who have heard of it often assume it is only concerned with adult literacy and GED completion. Those of us in adult education do not necessarily agree about what it encompasses or in some cases even view ourselves as "adult educators." These dynamics pose a potential identity crisis for adult education, especially since we lack a unified vision for the field. Although I am not advocating a monolithic adult education identity with a capital "I," I am suggesting that we need to reflect on who we are, what we do, how we do it, where we do it, and why. If we cannot articulate a shared vision for our field, we risk losing resources, programs, power, and relevance.

What are the dimensions of professional identity in adult education? How have you individually formed a professional identity or identities? Just as I do not believe in a unitary self (Clark, 1956), so too, I believe that it is possible for multiple identities to coexist within the individual. Adult education can also embrace multiple identities, but we need to

know what those might be. A starting point is to identify the various "professional identities" that co-exist in adult education. These might be based on ideology, content expertise, work context, organization, professional affiliations, research interests, teaching styles or others. To which one(s) do you belong? How do we form a professional identity across such diverse divides? These questions persist as Imel, Brockett, and James (2000) conclude "many who practice adult education do not identify with adult education as a field because they do not see its relevance to their work and the learners they serve" (p. 632).

Our personal and professional identity is socially constructed through discourses and interactions within social and professional contexts (Allan & Lewis, 2005). A good clue to adult education identity is how you narrate your work in these contexts. How do you talk about your work with friends, peers, students? What is your adult education elevator speech (how you would describe your work in the time it takes to ride the elevator)? How do your colleagues in adult education talk about their work? What can we learn from this self-talk and shared professional dialogue?

Adult education's myriad contexts illustrate how we co-create and reformulate our field through talk and action. For instance, how CPE professionals view their identity and work may be very different from how literacy teachers understand theirs. Community activists working for social justice may cringe when human resource developers approach their work with the same commitment and passion. Each context of adult education forms a community that has its own set of values, discourses, practices, and theories. How do we get these varied communities to talk to each other? Even though professional contexts of adult education differ, we can probably all agree on certain principles, for instance honoring the experience of the adult learner or giving her autonomy in the learning encounter. Our big challenge is to get these siloed communities of adult education sharing identities and creating vision.

One approach to forging a more collective, perhaps collaborative adult education would be to engage in dialogue across our many borders to share definitions, visions and practice. Through this process, we could identify what binds us together in this field of adult education. One opportunity for engaging in this conversation is through exploring what professionalization of the field would look like. Professionalization involves defining a codified body of knowledge, key principles, theories, and practices. It may also involve some type of certification process.

What Are the Considerations Related to Professionalization?

Professionalizing a field so vast as adult education is an intimidating prospect. The diversity and breadth of the field mimics the diversity of learning in adulthood. Given that the field of adult education is characterized by educators of adults and adult educators working in parallel, the notion of an "adult education profession" is elusive. The concept "profession" is traceable to the Latin *profiteri* meaning a public pronouncement of certain principles and intentions and devotion to a certain way of life (duTont, 1995). Professions have either explicit or implicit codes of conduct and are based on rigorous training and study to learn the field. Professions are sustained through research, literature, and legislation (duTont, 1995). The literature base, graduate study, and professional associations have helped establish adult education as a profession (Imel, Brockett, & James, 2000), however, not all adult educators participate in these activities. Professional socialization involves building specialized knowledge and skills, incorporating a sense of occupational identity, internalizing the norms of the profession, and adapting the values and norms into individual behavior and self concept. Professional socialization can occur formally through a graduate training program, or informally through contact with peers and informal sanctions according to duTont (1995) who observes,

> Professional socialization is a developmental process of adult socialization. Not only does it involve the recognition of an assumed identity by the outside world, it also involves individuals' recognition of the identity within themselves and the non-deliberate projection of themselves in its terms—referred to as *internalization*—and it depicts the success of past socialization. (p. 165)

Professional socialization causes a new identity to emerge, much of which is formed through academic training. Yet, not all adult educators have received such training.

> The knowledge base is taught through graduate programs to new members, who then participate in professional activities, which in turn solidifies a sense of belonging to the profession. Those who

identify themselves with the profession, or are seen by others as members, generally represent formal, institutionalized, mainstream adult education… (Merriam & Brockett, 1997, p. 239)

Considering that graduate training programs, research activities, and professional associations serve as the major functions of professional socialization, it is fair to assume that a large majority of those delivering adult education are excluded from this process, particularly since only 9.4 percent of the U.S. population holds a master's degree (*Notes on the Ph.D. Degree*, n.d.) and less than one percent of the population attains a Ph.D. (U.S. Census, 2004). The well-established academic field of adult education has a more cohesive identity than the field's practitioners. In fact, as noted elsewhere in this article, those working in an educational capacity with adults may or may not identify themselves as "adult educators." Merriam and Brockett (2007) suggest that the side of the field that challenges our assumptions about "what is an adult educator" or "what is the profession" exists in that it does not fit how we define adult education or train people to practice within the field. They suggest that this "raises issues about the meaning of professionalism itself and its relationship to the world of practice" (p. 239).

Professional identity in adult education takes two forms. The first is how you conceive of your own professional identity as an adult educator—the individual identification with an adaptation to the field and culture of adult education. Since there are many types of adult education, you might be more inclined to identify yourself as a literacy teacher or health educator or human rights activist or human resource developer or instructional designer, rather than as an adult educator. The other form of professional identity is how the field itself creates, maintains, and changes its professional identity. In other words, it has a public face with a relatively agreed upon discourse, research, and practice. This "profession" is easier to trace by identifying the many professional groups and conferences that are concerned with adult education such as the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education, the Adult Education Research Conference, the Standing Conference on University Teaching and Research in the Education of Adults, the Council on Adult Basic Education, the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, the Academy of Human Resource Development, the University Continuing Education Association, the National Association of State Judicial Educators, the American Society for Training and Development, and dozens and dozens of others. Many associations and conferences also exist on

a state-by-state level. Given this range of professional associations, it is no wonder that forging either an individual or collective professional identity is challenging for adult education, since each of these subsets has its own professional identity.

Since the 1920s, there has been enduring debate about whether adult education should become professionalized (Merriam & Brockett, 2007). Professionalization itself represents opposing goals. On one hand, professionalization helps move the field from a marginal status to one of social influence. On the other hand, the field's absorption into professionalization may create a narrowly conceived field of practice that excludes and marginalizes diverse voices and approaches to adult education (Merriam & Brockett, 2007). Given the range of the field, it is not surprising that a single professional identity does not exist. The main issues surrounding the professionalization debate are whether professionalization truly improves practice or whether it constricts who can practice and how we define "good" practice (Merriam & Brockett, 2007). There are fears that professionalization would create an elite class of adult educators, excluding much of the large and diverse population that currently delivers adult education in some form or another. "Professionalization is simply another mechanism by which social power is distributed in society, and all existing asymmetrical power relationships among different races and between men and women are reproduced (often in complex and subtle ways) through this process" (Johnson-Bailey, Tisdell, & Cervero, 1994, p. 65). Regardless of whether or not you believe the field should professionalize, each of us experiences a process of professional identity development.

In spite of the problems with professionalization, adult education remains marginalized socially and institutionally. I believe professionalizing the field represents an opportunity to develop a stronger sense of shared vision and improve practice, teaching, and research. By remaining siloed in parallel universes, we fail to challenge ourselves by engaging with new, perhaps threatening ideas, and we isolate ourselves from ideas and opportunities that will allow us to grow as professionals and a profession. Further, we are marginalizing aspects of ourselves. This siloing can be dangerous and limit our ability to provide effective, powerful education, or negotiate in the best interest of adult education within and across contexts. When new professional communities are developed, the opportunity is created for exploring new ways of thinking and being within the newly created social context. Learning these new ways of be-

ing may impact both individual and collective identity.

What would professionalization look like? Beyond developing a certification process, it would require us to embrace our marginality. Marginality is generally regarded as an undesirable state, yet Sheared and Sissel (2001) counter that narrative by advocating that we should revel in adult education's marginal status. This sentiment is echoed by other adult educators:

> Marginality does have its benefits including greater independence to be creative and respond to needs and establishing distance from parent institutions to prevent being co-opted into the organization's mission. When one stands at the margins, astride the boundary between tribes, one stands also at the center of a larger, more adequate whole (Daloz, Keen, Keen, & Parks, 1996, p. 77).

Since we find ourselves both socially and institutionally marginalized, there is merit in embracing that status and making it work for us rather than against us. Daloz et al., note several gifts of marginality including: greater self-knowledge, improved awareness of others, ease with life at the edge, the ability to promote empathy and critical thinking across the margin's borders.

Wise and Glowacki-Dudka (2004) also urge us to embrace marginality suggesting it is largely "volition" in that as adult educators we choose to work on the margins. The margins are where dominant ideology and practice are challenged, making them a place of creativity and collaboration. It is on the margins where we gain understanding from insider-outsider perspectives, span disciplinary or ideological boundaries, and use the position and information available to it for creative problem solving, influencing change at the center.

Indeed, being on the margin appears to be the best place for adult education to begin stretching across its various boundaries and understanding how cross fertilization of ideas and collaboration between unlikely partners can help to both strengthen our professional identity and the field. Wise and Glowacki-Dudka remind us that we have the skills to foster dialogue and collaboration from the margins and create new partnerships and strategies for social change. Although we can embrace marginality and use it as a force for change, it is also important to remember that those in the center must be included and educated if we are to create lasting structural change. Sheared (2006) advocates the devel-

opment of a vision to help address these issues that includes examining who we are, developing a philosophy, and developing strategies aimed at social change.

It is also time to articulate and embrace a shared vision for the field. Professionalization forces us to describe what is sought for a better future and spell out the values through which the vision will be pursued. Creating vision also gives us an opportunity to develop a shared discourse and language about our practice, teaching and research. Creating professionalization also means delineating standards of practice, codes of ethics, and recognition of adult educators. By establishing standards and expectations, we create a process to ensure high quality in the field. Creating shared vision is not easy, as there are several points of agreement and disagreement in the field. These points of contention represent an opportunity for us to practice what we teach and engage in reflective dialogue about them. Although adult education is a diverse field, there are many boundaries over which there is much accord such as its humanistic tradition, value of lifelong learning, social and institutional marginalization, commitment to social justice, promotion of learner autonomy, the impact of social context on learning, constructivism, the influence of technology, and many others. These widely held beliefs make excellent platforms from which a sense of professional identity and vision can be cultivated across the parallel practices of the field.

Professionalization can also serve to rally, preserve, and bolster the status of the field of adult education. It provides the platform on which to examine shared values and best practices and would result in standards that help preserve and protect the field. It would also help recruit both adult educators and educators of adults into the field. The adult education profession has sustained itself for decades and has many expressions of professional identity and vision including academic programs, books, journals, publications, associations and conferences. A sense of professional identity could be strengthened with more communication and collaboration across these existing professional outlets. The Adult Education Research Conference celebrated its 50th year in 2009, and the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education has persevered. Yet, the field lacks an association dedicated to research in the field and creating one that has strong ties to practice would be one way of bridging between parallel structures of the field. Technology also holds promise for linking previously siloed parts of the field through online social networking, listservs, e-learning, e-mentoring, and blogs. Creating

a stronger sense of professional identity requires us to seek cross fertilization between academia and practice, as well as, the various contexts where adult education is practiced and studied.

This article set out to raise questions about the profession and professionalization of adult education. It addressed such questions as "Who is the adult educator?" "What is adult education's vision?" "Where does adult education happen?" "How does marginalization impact adult education?" "What is the identity of an adult educator?" "What are the considerations related to professionalization?" Adult education is a field with multiple professional identities and visions. Our diversity is both a strength and liability. Multiple boundaries, frameworks, and motives create a robust field that serves adult learners across many different institutions and contexts. Yet, at times the field's diversity serves to fragment and fracture adult education as a whole. Each segment of adult education has valuable frameworks and practices. Unfortunately, these attributes do not always translate into a shared vision for the field. Adult education can move to a position of greater strength and influence when we stop holding our various contexts at arm's length and begin crossing boundaries in a way that embraces the entire field for all that it has to offer adult education and learners. Professionalization holds great promise for attaining this vision.

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