

Forum

Adult Educators' Political Power

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Adult educators demonstrate a proclivity for starting new associations almost without regard for those that already exist. But adult educators have not been successful in designing effective, broadly based, coordinative organizations to bring the diverse special interest sectors together. The consequence of this is that the motto of the United States, *e pluribus unum*, clearly cannot be applied to the field of adult education. Until adult educators can agree on the name they give their own field, until they begin to cooperate to serve a larger social mission, politicians will continue to disregard them, individually and collectively.

The Whole is Less Than the Sum of the Parts

Philosophers debate the question of whether the whole is equal to or greater than the sum of its parts, depending upon the extent to which they regard the interaction among the parts as being of any consequence. The basic thesis of this article is that the whole of adult education is less than the sum of its parts because the parts interact in ways that detract from their potential collective impact. The lesson to be learned from the following review of historical and contemporary conditions is that until and unless adult educators can demonstrate a marked improvement in their ability to cooperate, they are destined to remain marginal in American society. Only if a wider vision of the field and its potential contribution to American society is adopted by administrators, researchers, and instructors in adult education will the organizations of adult educators collaborate productively so that the field's potential can be realized. As Cunningham (1993) has pointed out, "Defining adult education has always been political" (p. 13). That is the first political task to be undertaken.

Parties Involved: Individually and Collectively

Administrators and adult education instructors tend to be preoccupied with immediate, everyday institutional concerns to the exclusion of broader public issues. The separate organizations of adult educators

coalesce around a common interest in the nature of a sponsoring institution, such as university continuing education, and community services and continuing education within the Association of American Community Colleges. These associations direct their attention to the promotion of legislation that will serve to advance their own institutional segment of the adult education field. Busy adult educators seem to have little energy left to lobby for legislation that will bring increased support to other sectors of the field. For reasons that are not entirely clear, adult educators, as a group, display an amazing inability to cooperate effectively in working toward the common good through their organizations.

Because so many teachers and administrators in the field of adult education have come to their present positions without the benefit of having participated in graduate adult education programs, it is not surprising that their perception of the dimensions of the field is narrow. Focused on the particulars of their own institutional settings, these individuals understandably concentrate their efforts into activities and associations that deal almost exclusively with a narrow sector of the larger field, being drawn to practical problems of dealing with day to day tasks rather than reflecting on the broad field.

In examining relationships between adult education and political science, Thomas (1991) observed that in the United States adult educators emerged from the public schools and other child and youth-centered systems which were characterized by their apolitical nature. Similarly, the Cooperative Extension Service provided the field with a number of leaders in the formative years of the movement, and the Hatch Act expressly forbade their participation in political activities. Accordingly, it is not surprising that adult educators even today exhibit a reluctance to become politically involved in advancing a broad vision of their field and its potential contributions to society.

Constituency: Paying for Programs

Institutions typically involve not only a clientele and a group of actors who render service to the clientele but also an ownership or sponsorship group—a constituency who provides either financial or non-monetary (or both) support to enable the actors to devote their time to the delivery of the services to the clientele. The *constituency* is composed of individuals, groups, or governments who support the purpose of the institution and give encouragement and assistance regardless of whether they, themselves, benefit directly from the services provided. An educational institution

whose income depends entirely on payment for services by its clientele leads a precarious existence and has not succeeded in earning the support of those sectors of the community that have or control public resources needed to carry out socially significant programs.

Clientele: Participating in Programs

Teachers and administrators of adult education programs typically have not encouraged their clientele to take a public stand regarding the value of adult education. The clientele seldom express their view about the value of adult education to their elected officials at the local, state, or national levels. Accordingly, the contribution of the clientele to the provision of expanded learning opportunities is limited to the payment of registration fees. Most adults who are participating in educational programs are not becoming aware of their potential influence on government programs that could enlarge and improve such programming both for themselves and their neighbors.

Researchers

The Commission of Professors of Adult Education, as well as continuing supporters of the Adult Education Research Conference, seem content to talk to each other about the inadequate funding for adult education research, but, for reasons that are not entirely clear, they do not perceive themselves as playing a major role in federally funded research in this area. For example, the \$2,839,740 National Evaluation of Adult Education Programs contract involves a number of professors of adult education, not as the designers and directors of the study, but as members of a technical advisory group (Young, Morgan, Fitzgerald, & Fleischman, 1993). The Assessment of Adult Literacy in America, which included individuals in an advisory capacity who happened to be members of AAACE, was designed and conducted by the Educational Testing Service under contract with the National Center for Educational Statistics (Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, & Kelstad, 1993). Apparently, neither the Commission of Professors nor the members of the Adult Education Research Conference have impressed the Department of Education with their expertise in adult education research. The national image of adult education researchers is unimpressive, thus allowing various private organizations to be perceived as having superior expertise to plan and conduct high-budget research. Political astuteness would require that the researchers address this issue by dealing with Department of Education decision makers instead of simply assisting the private contractors.

Endless Proliferation of Associations

When two or three adult educators are gathered together, they exhibit an almost irresistible urge to start a new organization, one that lies outside of all the existing associations and one to serve a single segment of the broad field. This tendency to endlessly spawn associations that are not linked effectively with existing, broadly-based associations which have been in existence for decades leads to political impotence for both groups. Efforts to bring together the diverse associations have been significantly less effective than efforts to start new ones. The coordinative organizations, such as AAACE, remain almost invisible both to the public and to elected officials. Even the Department of Education seems not to be impressed with the special abilities of such coordinative groups.

Probably the most notable example of an ineffective effort at coordination is the Coalition of Adult Education Organizations (CAEO) which was incorporated on July 16, 1973 to serve the following purposes:

1. To identify and focus on major issues in adult and continuing education;
2. To facilitate the exchange of information about resources, actions, and plans of the organizations which are members of the coalition;
3. To facilitate the exchange of information about various aspects of adult and continuing education including: programs, financial support, legislation, administration, professional development, publications, research, and selection of faculty and staff;
4. To facilitate joint planning on projects to serve the field of adult and continuing education;
5. To be a resource for information and consultative services concerning adult and continuing education;
6. To promote the support of government, foundations and agencies to achieve equal educational opportunity for all persons; and
7. To cooperate with other groups, agencies, and organizations in the achievement of these goals. (Griffith, 1976, pp. 282-283)

Though the needs remain great, these purposes have yet to be achieved.

In the 1970s the short-lived Adult Education Action Council was an unsuccessful attempt to engage adult education leaders and organizations in systematic lobbying. It expired in 1975, and the explanation given was that it was duplicating the work of the CAEO (Griffith, 1976). However, evidence to support the claim that the lobbying work was being continued effectively has not been demonstrated by CAEO.

State Level and Urban Councils

In this century some efforts have been made to develop voluntary coordinative mechanisms at the city, state, and national levels. These organizations, such as the Adult Education Council of Greater Chicago or the Denver Adult Education Council, spent much of their time struggling to raise the funds to pay staff salaries with the result that little actual coordinative activity was accomplished. Similarly, directors of urban adult education concluded that their special needs were not being addressed adequately by any of the existing national organizations. Their solution: found another organization. As well, the state directors of adult (basic) education, who had met in connection with the AAACE for several years, have now set up their own special organization, hired an executive director, and in doing so weakened their linkages to other kinds of adult educators who participate in AAACE activities. Because state directors are able to control the flow of dollars from some federal programs, their isolation from the broader field impoverishes everyone, including them.

Advisory Councils

One instrument for cultivating public support for broadly based adult education programming is an active advisory council, representative of the constituency, that can intercede between the adult educators and elected politicians. Unfortunately, in an effort to administer their programs efficiently, too many programmers overlook the importance of an impact on public understanding and focus too narrowly on the time consumed in decision making with committees. So, they conclude that the energy used in developing and consulting an influential advisory council is not worth the effort. As a result, public understanding fails to develop.

Cooperation vs. Competition

The biggest puzzle in the whole picture is that although most adult educators espouse a gospel of cooperation, when it comes to actual practice, their guiding principle appears to be competition. Although the number of adults who might be participating in beneficial programs is many times larger than the actual number of participants, the attention of programmers seems riveted to competition with other providing groups for the limited number of current participants. The future is not likely to improve for the total field until those who want to regard themselves as adult educators accept a broad vision of the field and work together with their colleagues toward a common vision of a learning society.

Foundation Funding

Historically the leaders of AAACE's predecessor organizations (American Association for Adult Education [AAAE] and the Adult Education Association of the U.S.A. [AEA/USA]) have looked to foundations for their financial support with the understandable consequence that they paid less attention to the felt needs of practicing adult educators and the general public and tended to overlook the value of cultivating political support. The AAAE was founded largely at the initiative of Federick Keppel of the Carnegie Corporation, which provided continuing support for nearly a score of years.

When the AAAE could no longer count on the Carnegie Corporation for support, the leaders reorganized and joined with the Division of Adult Education Services of the National Education Association to form the Adult Education Association of the United States of America (AEA/USA). This group quickly succumbed to the generosity of the Fund for Adult Education whose definition of the field extended only so far as liberal adult education. Accordingly, the AEA/USA was only able to direct its attention to a narrow segment of the field because of the existence of a wealthy patron, the Fund for Adult Education. The net result was that instead of having a national association composed of a collection of state or regional councils, the national organization which evolved lacked an organic relationship to what are called "affiliate organizations" and hence sometimes gave the impression of being a head that is not attached to a body. Despite repeated attempts at restructuring, the current national association, AAACE, has not yet achieved an organizational form that effectively focuses the combined resources of these affiliates into one organization.

Opportunities Lost

In 1975 adult educators were provided with an opportunity to present their case to the American public by capitalizing on the publicity generated in connection with the publication of *Adult Functional Competency: A Summary* (Northcutt, 1975). However, the response of the adult education community (broadly defined) to the report and to the promotional activities of the U.S. Office of Education was insignificant; the findings were not used to justify massive increases either in literacy appropriations by state and federal government or to raise the consciousness of the American public regarding the challenges and contributions of adult educators to the

welfare of the nation. The opportunity was missed, and unless action is taken immediately, the opportunity to capitalize on the current report, *Adult Literacy in America* (Kirsch, et al., 1993), also will be lost.

In January of 1989, Forrest P. Chisman, supported by the Southport Institute for Policy Analysis, released his report, *Jump Start: The Federal Role in Adult Literacy*. This report was underwritten by an impressive group of organizations, including The Carnegie Corporation of New York, The Chase Manhattan Bank, The Exxon Corporation, The Gannett Foundation, The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, The William R. Kenan, Jr., Charitable Trust, The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, The Rockefeller Foundation, The Xerox Foundation, and Harold W. McGraw, Jr. The advisory group for that report included the then Executive Director of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education. However, even with the powerful press promotional efforts of the Southport Policy Institute as an inspiration, the AAACE and its state and provincial affiliates were not able to mount a major educational campaign to win the approval and financial support of their legislators or even to build effectively on the demonstrated interest of the financial sponsors of the report.

Furthermore, thirty-nine participants in the development process for the *National Evaluation of Adult Education Programs* (Young, et al., 1993) are listed in that report, but no representative of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education, per se, is included, although two staff members of the American Association of Retired Persons, a politically astute organization, are included (Kirsch, et al., 1993).

Overestimating the Power of Research

A faith in the power of research findings to produce desirable political actions characterized the AAAE in the 1920s, and even today that faith continues to have its adherents despite evidence to the contrary. Ian Morrison, Executive Director of the Canadian Association for Adult Education (CAAE), commenting on the 1991 report of a national study of adult literacy in Canada, stated:

This survey has influenced public consciousness and public policy more than any previous educational measurement by Statistics Canada. Its results are quoted in labour, management, voluntary sector and government circles—and for good reason. It has supplied, for the first time in Canada, or elsewhere for that matter, an objective measure of the symbolic communication capacity of our adult population. (p. 63)

Although Morrison anticipates that the publication of the survey results will bring about pressure on policy makers, on the compulsory educational delivery systems, and on those engaged in educational outreach, he, unfortunately, makes no clarion call to the Board of Directors and the membership of the CAAE to assume any responsibility for ensuring that the report is kept before the public and the government—at federal or provincial levels—so that adequately funded programming can be devised and provided to address the problems highlighted by the survey. He concludes his commentary on the report with the statement: "The use of the survey's findings is a very great example of the power of information to inform decision making. Interested observers will maintain a close watch on the results" (p. 64). Although it may not have been his intention, this concluding statement appears to cast Canadian adult educators into the role of "interested observers" rather than of action-oriented individuals who are willing to devote energy into ensuring that the information is used as evidence in the struggle to secure increased learning opportunities for Canadian adults. Instead, the impression is created that the publication of the information alone, in and of itself, without concerted follow-up actions, will bring about desirable changes in the provision of adult learning opportunities. Such faith well may be misplaced.

What To Do?

If individual adult educators are convinced that faith without works is unlikely to improve public appreciation and acceptance of, as well as to increase significantly public funding for, adult education, then several political action steps will be required:

1. Invent new ways of bringing together the divergent associations at the community, state, and, eventually, the national level so that they can speak for the broad field to local and state government. In doing so, emphasize the benefits of collaboration and cooperation in contrast to the dysfunctional outcomes of competition.
2. Re-invent the Coalition of Adult Education Organizations as a body that aspires to represent the broad field both to the American public and to the national government rather than as a body that exists to be a debating society.
3. Review the history of the Commission of Professors of Adult Education to ascertain why it has not achieved the academic status required for widespread acceptance by universities as well as by the Depart-

- ment of Education and encourage appropriate remedial actions.
4. Oppose and challenge the proliferation of terms used to label the field and actively pursue the goal of achieving acceptance of adult education as the umbrella term so that public acceptance of the term can be achieved and much of the confusion associated with the proliferation of terms eliminated.
 5. Include at least minimal mention of the social value of adult education in every program so that participants will acquire an appreciation for the contribution adult education can make to society and will recognize the need to educate public officials regarding the justification for support from public funds.
 6. Encourage staff members in adult education institutions to pursue graduate study in this field in order to increase their capacity to envision the broad field and to appreciate the complementary, rather than competing, roles each institution plays in providing optimal learning opportunities for adults.
 7. Establish advisory councils composed of constituents who represent the influential sectors of the community and whose support is essential if public funding is to be achieved, keeping in mind that, for detailed programming, representation from the clientele is useful.
 8. Support only those leaders who have a broad vision of the field and who are committed to cooperation and collaboration with all associations of adult educators, by whatever name, in working toward public understanding and political support of expanded learning opportunities for all.

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