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The Profession and Practice of Adult Education

An Introduction



John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

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Sharan B. Merriam
Ralph G. Brockett

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Preface

Adult educators are everywhere—in the community, in the workplace, on farms, and in hospitals, prisons, libraries, colleges, and universities. They plan and administer programs, and they counsel and facilitate learning in subjects as diverse as ceramics, computer training, nutrition, job skills, literacy, continuing medical education, and environmental awareness. The growing visibility of adults engaging in education (reflected in movies, news stories, and television shows), however, is offset by the fact that many educators of adults remain unaware that they are part of a cadre of thousands that constitutes the field of adult education. This book is meant to broadly outline this professional field of practice.

Nearly fifteen years ago, Sharan Merriam published a coauthored book on the foundations of the field of adult education (Darkenwald and Merriam, 1982). That book, and the later edited *Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education* (Merriam and Cunningham, 1989), have been the only major sources providing comprehensive overviews of the field.

On the doorstep of the twenty-first century, we believe that the timing is right for an updated introductory text on adult education. *The Profession and Practice of Adult Education: An Introduction* describes and interprets the broad and rapidly developing field of study and practice. It is something of a “snapshot” of adult education in North America at this point in time.

As with any introductory text, we have had to make choices about what to include and what to emphasize. This is not a book about how to plan programs or teach adults; instead, it is about what constitutes professional practice. It is not our intent to give detailed scenarios about specific practices or individual practitioners, but rather to frame information by providing a conceptual map of the field. And while we attend to international, community-based, non-formal, and informal adult education in various chapters, the emphasis is on North American adult education, as well as formal, organized delivery systems.

Audience

The major audience for *The Profession and Practice of Adult Education: An Introduction* will be practitioners working in adult education in various capacities and in a multitude of settings. Some of these practitioners will also be graduate students enrolled in more than a hundred North American master's and doctoral degree programs. In these graduate programs, an introductory course often affords students the first realization that they are part of a larger community of adult educators who have much in common; such a course is thus an important socializing mechanism for building the field of adult education while providing a base for other courses in the curriculum.

Other practitioners who discover that they are involved in adult education, and who are interested in becoming better acquainted with the field, will also find this book helpful in gaining a basic understanding of adult education.

Finally, our experience with past introductory texts would suggest that practitioners and students in other countries will also make use of this text.

Overview of the Contents

The Profession and Practice of Adult Education: An Introduction is designed to (1) provide a descriptive overview of major dimensions of the adult education field, and (2) raise awareness of the critical

issues and tensions inherent in the practice of adult education. We anticipate that many readers are knowledgeable about their particular aspect of practice but new to adult education as a whole. Acquiring a basic understanding of the entire field—a map of the territory—is a necessary first step to situate one’s own base of practice within a larger framework. Hence, eight of the book’s eleven chapters are primarily descriptive.

With regard to the second goal of raising awareness of the critical issues, three chapters specifically examine issues and tensions of the field. Rather than being grouped at the end of the book, these three chapters are strategically placed to focus on the topics of those chapters immediately preceding them, and they attempt to help you stand back to critically assess issues challenging the field. In so doing, we hope that you will see the potential for becoming reflective about your practice, and about who will take an active role in shaping the future of adult education.

To highlight this dual focus of description and critique, the chapters of the book have been divided into three parts. Part One, “Foundations of Adult Education,” contains four chapters. Part Two, titled “The Organization and Delivery of Adult Education,” includes four chapters. The three chapters in Part Three are devoted to the topic of “Developing a Professional Field of Practice.”

Chapter One sketches the broad outlines of the field in terms of its definitions, major concepts, goals, and purposes; and it asks readers to situate their practice within this framework. The underlying theme of the chapter is that what “counts” as adult education is determined by the context and where one stands in relation to the field.

Chapter Two explores the philosophical foundations of adult education. We discuss major schools of educational philosophy and present a rationale for engaging in philosophical inquiry.

Recognizing the impossibility of covering the history of adult education in a single chapter, we wrote Chapter Three as an examination of how the history of the field has been approached and interpreted. As with philosophy, we present a number of arguments for studying history.

Part One concludes with a chapter that outlines three critical issues related to the foundations of adult education practice: whether we should strive for unity, whether we should align with the rest of education, and whether the primary focus of our activity should be the individual or society.

In Part Two, Chapters Five through Eight center on the organization and delivery of adult education. Chapter Five outlines how agencies and organizations deliver formal adult education in the United States. In addition to institutionally based typologies, we map the field by content area and personnel. We also address the process involved in delivering programs.

Chapter Six focuses on the learner in adult education, addressing who participates and why, what they are studying, and so on. We also cover some basic information about the nature of adult learning.

Chapter Seven shifts to a global context. We first describe what adult education is like in other parts of the world, then attempt to conceptualize international adult education as a forum for exchanging ideas and experiences. We also discuss international adult education as a part of the academic discipline of comparative studies.

Chapter Eight focuses on the issues related to the organization and delivery of adult education. Here we focus on the troublesome issues of opportunity, access, and participation. Since the barriers and responses are common to most countries, this chapter is written with a global perspective.

Part Three contains three chapters related to the development of adult education as a professional field of practice. Chapter Nine examines current aspects of the professionalization of adult education. We look at three elements of what constitutes a profession: professional associations, literature and information resources in the field, and academic preparation.

While many important developments in the adult education field are linked to professionalization, a vital element of adult education takes place outside the mainstream. In Chapter Ten, we explore this “invisible” side of the field by looking at who these edu-

cators are and what they do. A major emphasis of this chapter is on efforts to promote adult education for social change.

Chapter Eleven serves to bring closure to the book by addressing some of the tensions and issues related to the very different visions of adult education offered in the previous two chapters. The chapter closes with a discussion of possible future directions for adult education.

Acknowledgments

A number of people have contributed their time and expertise toward making this book possible. To University of Tennessee graduate students who offered comments on earlier drafts of Chapter Three, and to University of Georgia doctoral students Emuel Aldridge, Lilian Hill, Patricia Reeves, and Debra Templeton, we thank you for the many hours you devoted to editing draft chapters, tracking down references, and helping us assemble the final manuscript. A special thanks goes to Lilian Hill for her long hours of work on the index, and to Patricia Brockett, who assisted in the final preparation of the index. Our grateful appreciation also goes to colleagues Ronald Cervero, Carolyn Clark, Tal Guy, and Arthur Wilson, who critiqued the book's organization and draft chapters. Your suggestions did much to strengthen the book. To Arthur Wilson, who also served as a manuscript reviewer for Jossey-Bass (along with Adrienne Bonham and a third, anonymous reviewer), we thank you for your detailed reading and helpful critique. Finally, we want to acknowledge family members Robert Rowden and Patricia and Megan Brockett, who lovingly endured the absences, stresses, and anxieties associated with our writing this book.

August 1996

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Preface to the Updated Edition

In the ten years since the original publication of *The Profession and Practice of Adult Education*, our world has witnessed many profound changes. Stimulated by geopolitical realignments, increased terrorism worldwide, globalization, natural disasters, and environmental crises, today's world is very different from even a decade ago. At the same time, technological advances have drastically changed how we work, how we communicate with others, how we keep in touch with one another, and how we are able to maximize opportunities for learning. All of these changes have impacted the profession and practice of adult education.

Former U.S. Secretary of Labor Robert Reich, in his book *The Future of Success*, characterized American society today as being in “the era of the terrific deal” (Reich, 2001). By this, he meant that so many of the accoutrements most people in the U.S. and other developed nations have come to take for granted can be had at a much lower financial cost than at any other time. Furthermore, we are caught up in what Barry Schwartz calls the “paradox of choice” (Schwartz, 2004). According to Schwartz, the paradox of choice refers to the notion that in today's society, the range of choices available in nearly all aspects of life are virtually unlimited. Every day, we face choices about which food is good for our health, which books we wish to read, which career move is best. Schwartz claims

that while choice can be a good thing, *too much* choice can have a negative impact on the quality of life because there is a risk that people will keep looking for the “next best thing” and, hence, be unable to be satisfied with the choices they have made.

In adult education, as in society as a whole, the growth of new opportunities for learning has mushroomed. Online learning and other distance education opportunities have blurred the geographical boundaries that an institution can serve. In addition to the rise of online degree-granting institutions, most higher and continuing education institutions are offering courses and some degrees online as a standard part of their curriculum. Similarly, the need and the opportunities for learning in the workplace continue to expand. The percent of U.S. adults participating in adult education programs of any sort has increased from an estimated 14 percent in 1984 to 46 percent in 2001 (Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner, 2007). Add to this the large number of informal adult education activities and self-directed learning efforts undertaken by adults, and it becomes clear that the *practice* of adult education is thriving in the early twenty-first century.

At the same time, the *profession* of adult education has faced some challenges and even setbacks over the last decade. Perhaps this is best illustrated in difficulties that have arisen in efforts to maintain a thriving “umbrella” adult education professional association in the U.S. In 1998, the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE) faced a major financial crisis, and a year later, the Commission on Adult Basic Education, one of the largest groups within AAACE, voted to leave AAACE and establish itself as a separate entity. Since 1999, AAACE has faced declining membership and attendance at its annual conference. Yet, the association continues to produce two of the most influential periodicals in adult education, and the annual conference still serves to meet the professional development needs of those who attend.

Despite the many changes taking place in adult education today, we believe that *The Profession and Practice of Adult Education: An*

Introduction continues to serve as a timely introduction to the adult education field. The discussions of topics such as what “counts” as adult education, philosophy, history, providers of adult education, and the background on professionalization of adult education still reflect the essence of contemporary adult education. With our wish for the book to continue to serve its purpose as an introductory text, we have worked with Jossey-Bass to make the book more readily available by producing it in a paperback format. We have added a completely new Epilogue that strives to capture some of the major changes since *Profession and Practice* was first published. In this Epilogue, we consider developments in five areas that have had an impact on adult education over the past decade: globalization, the interface between human resource development and adult education, holistic conceptions of learning, critical adult education and diversity, and the current state of the adult education profession.

Acknowledgments

We wish to offer a special thanks to David Brightman, our editor at Jossey-Bass. David has been an enthusiastic supporter of our work, and his involvement was vital in bringing this paperback edition to life. Also, we wish to thank our spouses, Robert Rowden and Mary Brockett, for their love and encouragement. Finally, we would like to acknowledge the many students and professors who have used the book over the past decade. Their support is what gave us the impetus to find a way to keep the book in print and relevant to the early twenty-first century. We hope that through this updated edition, *The Profession and Practice of Adult Education* can continue to serve the adult education field and those who study and practice it.

May, 2007

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The Authors

Sharan B. Merriam is professor of adult education at the University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia, where her responsibilities include teaching graduate courses in adult education and qualitative research methods, and supervising graduate student research. Her doctorate is in adult education from Rutgers University. Dr. Merriam's research and writing activities have focused on the foundations of adult education, adult development, adult learning, and qualitative research methods. For five years she was coeditor of *Adult Education Quarterly*, the major research and theory journal in adult education. She is a three-time winner of the prestigious Cyril O. Houle World Award for Literature in Adult Education for books published in 1982, 1997, and 1999. She regularly presents seminars on adult learning and qualitative research throughout North America, southern Africa, Southeast Asia, and Europe. She has been a Fulbright Scholar to Malaysia and a Distinguished Visiting Scholar at Soongsil University in South Korea.

Ralph G. Brockett is professor in the Department of Educational Psychology and Counseling at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, where he is coordinator of the adult education concentration. He received his B.A. in psychology and his M.Ed. in guidance and counseling from the University of Toledo, and he also holds a Ph.D.

in adult education from Syracuse University. Previously, he held faculty positions at Montana State University (1984–1988) and Syracuse University (1982–1984) and has worked in continuing education program development for health and human services professionals. He is past chair of the Commission of Professors of Adult Education and has served on the board of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education. In addition, he is a past editor-in-chief of *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* and co-editor of *Adult Learning*, and has served on the editorial boards of four adult education journals. He received the Malcolm Knowles Memorial Self-Directed Learning Award in 2004 and was inducted into the International Adult and Continuing Education Hall of Fame in 2005.

Among Brockett's previous books are *Toward Ethical Practice* (2004, with R. Hiemstra), *The Power and Potential of Collaborative Learning Partnerships* (1998, co-edited with I.M. Saltiel and A. Sgroi), *Overcoming Resistance to Self-Direction in Adult Learning* (1994, co-edited with R. Hiemstra), *Self-Direction in Adult Learning: Perspectives on Theory, Research, and Practice* (1991, with R. Hiemstra), and *Ethical Issues in Adult Education* (1988, edited).

Brockett's major scholarly interests are in the areas of professional ethics for adult education, self-direction in adult learning, and the study of the adult education field.

Part I

Foundations of Adult Education

In the four chapters that constitute Part One of *The Profession and Practice of Adult Education: An Introduction*, we trace the development of adult education through its evolving purposes and definitions, its philosophical underpinnings, and its historical perspectives. We also explore several of the ongoing issues related to the field's foundation and evolution.

In Chapter One, “What Counts as Adult Education?” we begin by pointing out that the context of adult education in North America has shaped the definitions, concepts, goals, and purposes of the field. What has “counted” as adult education has changed over the years; furthermore, where one stands in relation to the field—as practitioner, academician, policymaker, or interested spectator—leads to particular understandings of what constitutes adult education.

The values and beliefs held by individuals and society as a whole shape which goals and purposes are considered important in the practice of adult education. Hence, Chapter Two outlines a number of philosophical frameworks that have influenced how the practice of adult education is perceived. In particular, we discuss the various schools—liberal and progressive, behavioral and humanist, and critical philosophical—and their manifestations in adult education. We also present a rationale for engaging in philosophical inquiry and offer suggestions for taking responsibility for articulating a personal philosophy.

Every field has its history. Rather than attempt to cover the history of adult education in a single chapter, we have instead chosen in Chapter Three to examine how history has been presented by various writers. We address the questions of who and what has been studied, how history is a historian's interpretation, and how we might benefit from studying our field's past.

In the fourth and final chapter of Part One, we grapple with three key issues related to the foundations of the field. The perennial question of whether adult education should work toward unity or toward preserving the diversity of the field is explored first. The second issue—whether adult education should align itself more closely with the rest of education—is, of course, related to the notions of identity and professionalism inherent in the first issue. The third issue centers on what the primary focus of adult education should be. Finally, all three issues are linked together in a discussion of their implications for public policy in adult education.