An Invitation to the Dance: The Importance of Practitioners Undertaking Research in Adult and Continuing Education

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ABSTRACT

Is research a necessary, or even a desirable, activity for adult and continuing education practitioners? Why, on top of all of the other roles and expectations, such as generating sufficient revenue, would practitioners choose to add research to their long list of other responsibilities—especially when it doesn't seem important to many of their colleagues or to their deans/directors? This paper explores these questions with the objective of convincing at least some of the practitioners who read this article that they should be engaged in research activities. Indeed, in some cases, it is likely that readers who think that they don't do research will be persuaded that they are presently engaged in forms of research!

The paper begins with a review of the literature in an effort to assess

RÉSUMÉ

La recherche est-elle une activité nécessaire ou même désirable pour les praticiens en éducation permanente? Pourquoi les praticiens choisiraient-ils de faire de la recherche en plus de tous leurs autres rôles et responsabilités, tels que la génération de recettes suffisantes—en particulier quand cette activité ne semble pas importante à plusieurs de leurs collègues ou à leurs doyens/directeurs? Cet article explore ces questions afin de convaincre au moins quelques praticiens qui le liront qu'ils devraient s'engager dans des activités de recherche. En effet, dans quelques cas, il est problable que les lecteurs croyant ne pas faire de la recherche seront persuadés qu'ils en font présentement.

Cet article fait d'abord un survol de la documentation afin d'évaluer quel taux de recherche se fait par des

the level of research activity presently undertaken by practitioners. Next, a variety of perspectives about what is meant by the term "research" is explored. In the following section, barriers to practitioners doing research are considered, and, finally, the arguments for practitioners doing research are examined.

While this paper is aimed at adult and continuing education practitioners in general, it has been written with a particular focus upon the membership of CAUCE.

praticiens. Ensuite, on y explore une variété de perspectives sur ce que veut dire le terme "recherche." La section suivante considère les obstacles que doivent surmonter des praticiens faisant de la recherche et finalement, on y examine les raisons pour lesquelles les praticiens font de la recherche.

Bien que cet article vise généralement des praticiens en éducation permanente, il a été écrit en particulier pour les membres de l'AÉPUC.

ARE PRACTITIONERS IN ADULT AND CONTINUING EDUCATION DOING RESEARCH?

There have been numerous surveys of university-based continuing educators in both Canada and the United States over the past decade regarding their organizational priorities and activities. These surveys have frequently included questions relating to the level of research activity undertaken by practitioners.

Bains (1985) reported on a survey of members of CAUCE. One-half of those included in the survey indicated that they spent no time on either basic or applied research activities. Only 16 percent reported that they spent more than 10 percent of their time on research. It is important to note that 54 percent of those respondents in the survey held faculty rank at their universities.

Brooke and Morris (1987) surveyed CAUCE deans and directors. They reported that research was the least important of the major functions performed by their continuing education units. The authors also requested information from deans and directors on the allocation of time for professional staff. They reported that only 4 percent of the time of the professional staff was spent on scholarly activities such as research, teaching, and writing (p. 28). It is likely that respondents understood the question to relate only to time associated with their assigned workload. In other words,

some of the professional staff might be spending additional time on re-search activities on top of their assigned workload. A follow-up study was conducted by Morris and Potter (1996), which employed a very similar survey form. For example, this study also asked respondents to indicate what activities constituted the major roles of the continuing education unit. While "Research" was one of the optional responses, it was not even listed among the activities reported by the authors since it was selected by so few respondents (p. 5). Only 9 of the 46 respondents (i.e., approximately 20 percent) reported that research was considered to be a component of their continuing education unit's mandate (J. Morris, personal communication, July 30, 1996).

Garrison and Baskett (1989) conducted a study of members of the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education (CASAE). They asked respondents to indicate whether they had university affiliation and whether they were expected to publish. Included in the survey (and in the membership of CASAE) were graduate students, faculty in academic departments of Adult and Continuing Education, and practitioners. Accordingly, it is difficult to separate the responses of practitioners from other respondents. Nonetheless, the authors reported that only 36 percent of the respondents affiliated with a university and not expected to publish were presently doing research. They observed that 68 percent of this group of respondents were primarily involved in administrative-management work and ". . . this group appears to be comprised of those associated with university continuing education programming roles" (p. 39).

The paucity of research publications is not restricted to practitioners in this country. For example, it has been reported that the research section of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE) is on the verge of collapse because too few papers have been submitted for presentation at the annual conference in recent years (Garrison, 1994, p. 196).

There is some evidence to suggest that university continuing educators would like to do more research. For example, Kops (1995) reported on a study by Hartman, conducted in 1982, of the time allocation by academic staff in the Continuing Education Division at the University of Manitoba. Kops states that, on average, these faculty would have preferred to spend 15 percent of their time on research activities, but actually allocated only 7 percent. Even though that study was conducted some time ago, Kops concludes that it is reasonable to assume that little has changed since that time (p. 54).

Finally, the number of manuscripts submitted to the CAUCE Journal each year is consistently modest. In 1995–96, there were 10 manuscripts submitted. The corresponding numbers were 8 in 1994–95, 11 in 1993–94, 9 in 1992–93, and 13 in 1991–92 (G. Moss, personal communication, August 12, 1996).

The general picture emerging from the foregoing reports and data suggests that some research is being done by university continuing educators, but that it is the minority of these practitioners, in the minority of continuing education units, who do the research. Pearce (1993) refers to Pareto's Principle and suggests that 80 percent of the research is done by 20 percent of the practitioners (p. 17).

What is "Research" in Adult and Continuing Education?

As Merriam and Simpson (1984) note, there are many definitions of the term "research." They define research as ". . . a systematic process by which we know more about something than we did before engaging in the process" (p. 2). This definition embraces a significant portion of the work undertaken by continuing educators—most notably in the areas of needs assessment and program evaluation. As Tom and Sork (1994) observe, practitioners undertake research in order to better understand phenomena related to their work. They state:

> If we understand research to be the process of trying to understand phenomena, practitioners in any field are constantly engaged in research. Whenever an educational practitioner tries a new instructional technique or interacts with a learner in a new way, he or she is conducting an experiment. . . . So we begin . . . with the assumption that all practitioners engage in the production of knowledge, that is, research. (p. 42)

Knox (1985), on the other hand, defines research findings as those that are published. Much of the research produced by practitioners is not published, but is used to guide program development and program delivery decisions. While Knox concludes that technical reports and evaluation reports do constitute research, he would nonetheless exclude the nonpublished scholarly inquiry undertaken by practitioners (p. 181). In contrast, Richardson (1994) distinguishes between two types of research on practice. The first type he calls "practical inquiry," which is research

undertaken by practitioners in order to improve their practice and is not conducted for publication. The second type he calls "formal research." Similarly, Belar and Perry (1992) describe a model for "scientist-practitioners," which describes psychologists who ". . . embody a research orientation in their practice and a practice relevance in their research" (p. 72). They observe that this model emphasizes the integration of scientific methods with professional practice and note that the use of research skills does not have to lead to journal publication.

Others have described various types or categories of research. Hayes (1991) distinguishes between basic, applied, evaluation, and action research. Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) note that it is not always easy to distinguish between basic and applied research. They offer as an example of a "purely applied research project" the use of a needs assessment study undertaken by a university continuing education unit to determine the level of interest that adults in a particular community might have for various educational offerings (p. 232).

Blunt (1995) discusses two different orientations to research in the field of Adult and Continuing Education. The first he identifies as the "philosophical view," which argues that the primary objective of research should be to support social change. The second orientation he calls the "pragmatic view," which holds that research should be driven by problems/issues that originate from practice. Not surprisingly, his review of adult education research in Saskatchewan concluded that research undertaken by faculty in the extension divisions at the two provincial universities focused upon pragmatic concerns of program delivery and professional practice (p. 81).

Many argue that evaluation studies must be considered as being separate from research. For example, Wolf (1990) and Reynolds and Walberg (1990) distinguish between research and evaluation studies, although the latter authors propose a "relinking" of research and evaluation. Merriam and Simpson (1984) allow that evaluation and research, both of which are identified by them as being forms of systematic inquiry, differ in the questions being asked rather than the methods being employed. They state that evaluation is a type of applied research ". . . because it is involved in immediate problems and is likely to have an immediate impact upon practice" (p. 7).

Clearly, there are many views of what constitutes "research." While it is useful to differentiate between types of research, on bases such as methodology or purpose, there is no obvious advantage to arbitrarily limiting the concept so that it excludes large areas of systematic inquiry. As Dinham

and Stritter (1986) argue:

> The traditional view that research is conducted to explain, predict, and/or control natural phenomena may be insufficient for guiding research on education for professional practice. A field that is a "learned profession," an "applied science," or a "practice discipline" rests not only on the rigors of disciplined inquiry but also on a commitment to practice. . . . Research on education for a practice discipline must reflect not only the field's disciplined inquiry but also its orientation to practice. (p. 965)

WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS TO PRACTITIONERS DOING RESEARCH?

After reviewing the literature relating to the barriers that limit or prohibit opportunities for practitioners to do research, one wonders how they do any research at all!

Certainly, the problems of time constraints and other demands, such as the need to achieve revenue targets, are frequently cited (Baskett, Marsick, & Cervero, 1992; Donaldson, 1993; Fletcher, 1993; Garrison & Baskett, 1989; Merriam & Simpson, 1984; Percival, 1993; Thomas, 1989; Tom & Sork, 1994).

Fletcher (1993, p. 47) identifies four reasons why relatively few practitioners undertake research.

1. Practitioners do not clearly understand the nature of the research process and assume that it requires a very formal proposal involving a large number of tests and hypotheses.

2. They imagine that they need to undertake a mechanical exercise involving a rigid and repetitive method to arrive at an answer that is fairly obvious.

3. The modesty of many practitioners leads them to assume that the problem is not likely to be of interest to others.

4. Practitioners have too many time constraints.

It is possible that Fletcher's second reason is also associated with a greater interest on the part of practitioners to "do" continuing education rather than to "study" continuing education. Nonetheless, in the next section it will be argued that practitioners must engage in some forms of research in order to maintain and extend their professional competence.

The lack of support from senior administrators can be a barrier. Ostrowski and Bartel (1985) argue that management must authorize the use of time for publishing activities and provide needed financial and staff support. Pearce (1993) reported that several of the deans she surveyed felt that their staff could only do research "on their own time" (p. 16).

A fundamental issue contributing to reduced research activity is the separation of scholarship and practice, which has been extensively discussed elsewhere (Cervero, 1991; Pittman, 1989b; Rice & Richlin, 1993; Schön, 1987; Thompson & Wagner, 1994). A number of these authors argue that many academicians are not addressing questions of relevance to practitioners. As was noted earlier, Blunt (1995) observes an orientation among many academicians to adopt a "philosophical" focus in contrast to the "pragmatic" focus of practitioners. Of course, one could argue that this situation could have the effect of increased interest among practitioners to undertake research that does relate to their needs and interests. In the light of other constraints, however, this does not appear to be the case.

Many continuing educators do not have graduate training in the field of Adult and Continuing Education (Bains, 1985; Bruce, Maxwell, & Galvin, 1986; English, 1992; Percival, 1993). Indeed, Percival observes that much of what continuing educators need to know is learned on the job and even that knowledge is usually gained through trial and error (1993, p. 142). Accordingly, many practitioners lack, or may feel that they lack, the necessary skills in research methodology and/or an adequate familiarity with the literature of the field to permit them to undertake research activities.

A number of authors have commented upon the lack of agreement as to what constitutes key research questions in the field (Bélanger & Blais, 1995; Blunt, 1994; Boshier, 1994; Carbone, 1992; Griffith, 1994; Pittman, 1989a; Thomas, 1995). While this situation may not discourage research activity, it is arguable that widespread agreement about the key issues in the field that need to be researched could contribute to increased research activity.

Finally, Knox (1985) has argued that many practitioners are not aware of much of the relevant research that is available to them and he states, "Publication in research journals benefits other researchers but reaches few practitioners" (p. 183). If practitioners are largely unaware of existing research literature, it is likely that they are not inclined to undertake research.

WHY SHOULD PRACTITIONERS DO RESEARCH?

The reasons for practitioners, and CAUCE members in particular, to engage in research are presented under four general themes.

1. Research activities support quality programming.

2. Professional competence is maintained and enhanced through research.

3. University continuing education units have a leadership role to play in conducting research that contributes to practice.

4. Undertaking research enhances individual and unit credibility within the institution.

Research, and especially applied research, plays an important role in support of quality programming. Mention has already been made of research activities such as needs assessments to guide and inform the program development process and program evaluations to ensure continuous improvement in our programming practice. As Brookfield (1992) and Carbone (1992) note, professional practice in adult and continuing education is often guided by untested assumptions and prescriptive generalizations. Brookfield (1992) states:

> . . . in adult education, as in most fields of practice, statements concerning what are viewed as desirable practices gradually become reified as universally appropriate methodological and philosophical injunctions. Examples of this would be arguments that all adult education must be conducted in collaborative group formats, that adults should never be lectured to, or that adults are always predisposed to be self-directed in their learning endeavors. (pp. 86–87).

These untested assumptions can significantly influence the design and conduct of educational programs in ways that may not be appropriate for all participants. Practitioners must be sceptical about such prescriptive generalizations, and they must be prepared to test these assumptions in their own practice.

A number of authors have identified research that they propose is especially relevant to improved practice (Brookfield, 1992; Cervero, 1988; Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982; Hayes, 1991; Merriam, 1993). This literature is too extensive to review here, but one example might be useful. Cervero (1988) cites the work by Grotelueschen (1986) in evaluating learner satisfaction as especially noteworthy. Cervero states that it is "One of the most

conceptually sound and most adequately tested approaches to evaluating learner satisfaction . . ." (p. 139). Since this form of evaluation is widespread, Grotelueschen's work should be well known and widely utilized by practitioners.

Professional competence is maintained and enhanced through research. Although this reason is closely related to the former one, it has more to do with our professional identity, and it argues the need for us to be "reflective practitioners." Many authors have argued that practitioners must be researchers of their own practice (Boyer, 1990; Cervero, 1988; Galbraith & Zelenak, 1989; Rice & Richlin, 1993; Schön, 1983, 1987; Usher & Bryant, 1987). As Peters (1991) notes:

> Reflective practice involves more than simply thinking about what one is doing and what one should do next. It involves identifying one's assumptions and feelings associated with practice . . . and acting on the basis of the resulting theory of practice. . . . Reflective practice involves a kind of inquiry—indeed, a kind of *research* [italics added]— that is not generally thought to be a component of work outside academic settings. (pp. 89–90)

University continuing education units have a leadership role to play in conducting research that contributes to practice. Equally important is the dissemination of such research to the wider community of practitioners. Houle (1980) suggests that practitioners can be divided into four groups based upon their approach to practice. At the upper end of the continuum of practitioners is the group known as the "innovators." These practitioners constitute the smallest group in any profession, and they seek to continually improve their practice. They are ". . . attracted to ideas and practices that are still untested . . . " (p. 156). A second group is known as the "pacesetters." They are progressive in their practice and value new ideas, but are more hesitant about being the first to try a new idea. The third group is the "middle majority," who adopt new practices only after they have become widely accepted. The last group is known as the "laggards," who are resistant to new ideas. Cervero (1988) reports that there is some evidence to support the validity of this classification of practitioners (p. 68). The innovators, while fewer in number, exert a major influence upon professional practice. Those of us in university continuing education units have a special opportunity, and a special responsibility, to be innovators in our field.

Finally, it is important for university continuing educators to undertake research as a way of enhancing our credibility among academic colleagues in other departments and colleges. Pearce (1992) states that ". . . continuing

education staff members need to be regarded as 'professionals' by the rest of the university community; . . . one of the best ways to do that is to increase the academic credibility of the continuing education unit" (p. 6). The same view is advanced by Simerly (1991), who notes that continuing education is moving closer to the central mission of institutions of higher learning. He proposes that continuing education professionals can best position themselves for this future by ". . . engaging in research and writing, and . . . teaching in both credit and noncredit activities as a way of legitimating one's self as a faculty member" (p. 9).

For continuing educators to be allowed to assume leadership roles in such areas as distance education, instructional development, and prior learning assessment (to name only a few examples), we must have credibility among our academic colleagues. A major component of such credibility is familiarity with the relevant research and conceptual literature in these areas, and, better yet, to be contributors to this literature. Pittman (1989b) and Thomas (1989) have helpful advice for practitioners interested in writing for publication on how to overcome barriers to such work.

We have opportunities to provide leadership in our field and in our institutions, which can be realized by research involvement and the enhanced credibility such activities provide.

CONCLUSION

My intent is not to argue that every practitioner should do research, although I would argue that every professional must keep abreast of relevant research findings in order to remain competent. As Pearce (1993) observed, it is likely that 20 percent of the practitioners will do 80 percent of the research. Even within the institutional membership of CAUCE, there are significant differences in the number and types of staff, size of budgets, institutional mandates, etc. For example, some CAUCE member units have professional staff with academic appointments, who are required to engage in research and scholarship for purposes of tenure and promotion. It is reasonable to expect that the research productivity, and research opportunities, of these CAUCE members will be greater than for those who do not have academic appointments. This is especially true of research activities that are not immediately relevant to practice, and that may be undertaken for purposes of publication. On the other hand, research activities of a more applied nature, such as needs assessments and program evaluations, are likely to be undertaken by all CAUCE member units.

As outlined in this paper, there are compelling arguments for practitioners to engage in research activities, and there are powerful barriers and disincentives for them to do so. If the professional staff of CAUCE member institutions are to assume the leadership role that awaits them, it will require more than just their individual commitment, as important as that commitment is. The support and commitment of the deans and directors of these units, and the institutions of which they are a part, will be required. Fundamental to achieving this outcome will be the recognition by individual practitioners that research is integral to their work and their professional competence. They will need to be convinced of the importance of research to their professional practice before they can convince others of this view.

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