Research in University Continuing Education is Dead: Long Live Reflective Practice

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Abstract

Jack Blaney's and Gordon Thompson's arguments in support of research in university continuing education units are countered as being implausible, wishful thinking, and not in keeping with actual behaviours in CE units. Rather than pursue the elusive goal of full acceptance into academe through research, informed professional practice is proposed.

Résumé

Les arguments de Jack Blaney et Gordon Thompson appuyant la recherche faite dans les unités universitaires d'éducation permanente sont perçus comme étant des idées non plausibles, chimériques et en désaccord avec la conduite actuelle des unités d'éducation permanente. Plutôt que de faire de la recherche afin de se faire accepter inconditionnellement dans le monde académique, il est proposé de poursuivre une pratique professionnelle informée.

Jack Blaney and Gordon Thompson, two of Canada's most experienced and outstanding university continuing education leaders, were asked to address the topic: "University Continuing Education units must have a commitment to research." I have been asked to comment on their articles.

Both Blaney and Thompson have chosen to convince us that research is important in university CE, and that university CE practitioners should engage in it. I shall take the opposite tack: continuing education units and their staff should not be involved in academic research.

I did not accept this assignment with this contrary position in mind. Until recently, I was a member of the CAUCE Research and Information Committee, which championed a public debate on the importance of

research in CE through *CJUCE.* Such a debate, so I thought, would open the issue to lively and fresh perspectives and show once and for all that research is central to the CE effort. After reading the two articles and reflecting on my own experience and reading, it became abundantly clear to me that we have been operating in some kind of foggy bottom land for far too long, to the point where we are unable to gain a clear, unhampered perspective of our situation.

Despite their stated support for research, both Thompson and Blaney inadvertently presage what we really all know: research in CE is neither valued by CE leaders nor by university senior administrators, nor do contemporary forces give any hint that this will change.

I propose that we stop indulging in wishful thinking. Let's bury the idea of the viability of research in CE units and get on with becoming superb programmers. I base my deductions on data and on experience. Although I have had limited time to systematically research this subject, these two advocates furnish us with sufficient evidence with which to challenge their own conclusions. As for experience, I draw on 31 years as a university continuing education programmer, researcher, research administrator, and teacher, with some considerable interest in the research/programming connection.

Thompson provides us with the most systematic account as to why research in CE units should be valued. Much of Blaney's arguments is encompassed in Thompson's discussion, so I will focus on Thompson's four assertions in support of research: 1) it supports quality programming; 2) it maintains and enhances professional competence; 3) it makes university CE units better leaders; 4) it enhances individual and unit credibility.

First, Thompson asserts that: "Research, and especially applied research, plays an important role in support of quality programming" (p. 9). Practitioners, he argues, must be wary of prescriptive generalizations, and subject them to the tests of science in their own practice. Presumably, this will lead to quality programming. I'm favourably drawn to this assertion; after all, I too was schooled in the value of the scientific method as a prime means to pursue truth and efficacious decisions.

We need only consult Blaney's article for a most compelling argument against the research-quality programming connection. As a pragmatist and a positivist, Blaney cuts to the quick: solve the problem by developing a hypothesis and testing it. While one may wish to poke holes in his methodology, other studies confirm his findings. Effective programmers are not

necessarily effective researchers. End of argument. Garrison and Baskett (1989) found that if you want to be a productive adult education researcher, get a position as an academic in the (dwindling) units that teach adult education. Do not take a job as a program director/specialist/assistant in a university CE programming unit. Prolific researchers in adult education are not in these programming units. They are found in academic adult education units, because the very culture, structure, and roles support, rather than conspire against, systematic inquiry and publication.

It seems to me that Blaney, in formulating the research question, exhibits his implicit values as an administrator. His very formulation of the question suggests that there should be such a correlation; that research is not a "stand alone" activity. Having established that there is no correlation between effective programming and research, he must now garner support for research elsewhere. Like Thompson, he reverts to institutional issues, such as perception of relevance in a university setting, improvement of professional work, broadening the reward system in universities, and conforming to the university's mission of scholarship.

Thompson argues that by using research, practitioners can test untested assumptions in their practice. This particular stance assumes that the systematic inquiry will resolve practice problems. As Schön and others have pointed out, by far the greatest proportion of practice problems are not amenable to systematic inquiry and codified knowledge; rather, they are ". . . problematic situations characterized by uncertainty, disorder, and indeterminacy" (Schön, 1983, p. 16). Most of university CE programming problems are resource, time, and political problems, not researchable problems.

We also need to clearly distinguish between theories of practice (Hunt, 1987), in which we intuitively develop and test operational rules of thumb to guide our practice, and normal research, in which we follow accepted cannons of inquiry to test assumptions and hypotheses. Most CE practitioners have neither the inclination nor the training to pursue the latter. Nor, I contend, is there general support for the pursuit of such research in CE units. Practitioners do, however unwittingly, engage in developing and revising their practice theory. It seems to me that Thompson is promoting a more reflective, critical practice instead of an enlarged research profile.

Thompson's second contention is that research will maintain and enhance professional competence. Again, we need only consult Blaney to bring this assertion into question. If there is no apparent correlation between high performance in research and high performance in program-

ming, then, we might conclude, the answer to effective programming is to be focused and brighter, and to direct one's high energy to just that—innovative and routine programming. If professional competence means being a very good programmer, then why would anyone undergo the stress of trying to serve the two masters of research and programming. Most of us who have tried to balance the two know that, rather than being synergetic, which teaching and research tend to be, they are in many ways incompatible. Programming is action-oriented, sporadic, and focused on deadlines and results. Research is contemplative and reflective, requiring large chunks of quiet time. To try to engage in both requires enormous additional energy.

Schön (1983, 1987) has pointed out that effective practitioners use "practical knowledge" to solve everyday professional problems. Dechant (1990), Marsick (1987), and Zemke (1985) have shown that most of the knowledge we need to do the job is gained on the job—primarily through interaction with colleagues and through learning by doing. Apparently, Percival (1993, cited by Thompson) comes to a similar conclusion about continuing educators specifically. Neither training nor research is a significant factor in work effectiveness. The ability to learn from, and on, the job is the most distinguishing characteristic of effective practitioners; reflective practice is called for, which, while involving systematic inquiry, entails much more than what could even be called scholarship in the broadened definitions that Blaney and Thompson advocate.

Even if a connection between effective programming and research could be established, I don't think either current conditions or past experience suggest more research by practitioners is likely. In his article, Thompson cites studies by Bains (1985), Brooke and Morris (1987), Garrison and Baskett (1989), and Morris and Potter (1996) that show that very few Canadian university CE programmers undertake research or consider it (or their unit considers it) a component of their work. One needs only to look at the titles of those who work in continuing education to get some sense of the minimal importance given to research. Of the 691 members listed in the 1996 CAUCE Handbook, only 30, or 4 percent hold titles that might suggest that research is involved in their roles (including professorial titles, director of research, and associate dean of research, but excluding administrative posts such as dean, or assistant to the dean). As Thompson himself attests (Thompson and Wagner, 1994), performance in organizations is related to the roles and performance expectations that the organization has for its members. Clearly, titles such as program coordinator, program manager,

and program director, which dominate the listings, do not signify that research is an important part of these positions, and there are considerably more of these positions than the more "academic" positions.

It would be instructive to find out the extent to which the job descriptions attached to these positions embrace expectations that the holder will carry out research. How many CE units have reward systems that specify and reward research in their merit and promotion systems? It would be further enlightening to examine the mission statements of CE units across Canada to see how many even espouse research and knowledge production as one of their mandates, and if the unit has someone assigned to specifically support staff research. I suspect one would find very little evidence that research is regarded as a legitimate part of either the programmers' or the unit's responsibilities.

Therefore, while it is a noble aspiration to enhance professional competence through individual research, the realities indicate no serious readiness on the part of the leadership in CE units to permit or support research as part of the role of the very large majority of university CE staff; their main task is program production. While there was much more tolerance, and even active support, for research in CE units in the extension culture of the 1960s, 1970s, and even the 1980s, few university administrators hold such values today. Again, Thompson's citations of Ostrowski and Bartel (1985) and Pearce (1993) support this view.

Even if the connection between research and programming was clearly established, the culture of most CE units is, at best, neutral and, at worst, hostile to research in adult and continuing education. This is because few of the staff in CE units hold graduate degrees in adult or continuing education, a fact confirmed by Thompson in Thompson and Wagner (1994) and by my 30 plus years of experience. Most staff have been hired to program in areas of expertise such as computers or languages. The field of adult and continuing education is foreign to them, and their tendency is to look at those undertaking research as nonproductive.

On the other hand, those CE staff who try to seriously engage in research regard the demands of "program production" as intrusions upon their research endeavours. Unlike our cousins in "pure" academic departments, we normally do not have an association with graduate teaching to support our research. Programming and research are the antithesis of each other; hardly an encouraging environment for scholarship.

Thompson's third assertion is that research makes members of university CE units better leaders. Although I don't think Thompson believes this, his

arguments seem to suggest that the power brokers in universities truly believe that research is of paramount value for all and that innovations based on research will be gleefully accepted. While university leaders may espouse such sentiments, I suggest that their behaviours are predicated on other, more compelling, forces such as survival, funding, maintenance of position with the political communities, and power. As Garrison and Kirby (1995) report, having a solution at the right place and time that answers to these other overarching organizational problems is much more liable to lead to adoption of innovative CE leadership. Those CE units that have provided innovative leadership in distance education or downtown educational centres have usually operated marginally and without much university-wide support, until these innovations met other, more dominant university purposes, such as demonstrating increased accessibility in order to satisfy political pressures or meet fiscal demands. Considerable research on the effectiveness of alternate delivery systems was available for decades before these CE-introduced innovations were embraced by senior university leadership.

A final argument used by both Blaney and Thompson is that research is an antidote for the credibility gap that most CE units experience. We should, they say, look more like "Mother," who then will perceive us, not as some alien creature, but as one of Hers. Even if we accept that it is desirous that university CE units seek some kind of additional internal credibility, we need to ask whether research is the most reasonable way of gaining such credibility. Many observers have advocated that it has been marginality, rather than centrality, that has kept CE units innovative.

The conventional wisdom has been to combat this marginality by wholeheartedly embracing the behaviours and values of our academic cousins. To a small degree, this may be possible. Baskett (1989) and Garrison and Kirby (1995) have chronicled the attempts of a Canadian university CE unit to become a full-fledged member of the academic community. This case is instructive because the ability to demonstrate faculty research prowess to gain some greater degree of university acceptance was only one of many factors. Circumstance, history, timing, clever and inept leadership, serendipity, and long-term planning were some of the other factors that led to the University of Calgary accepting the Faculty of Continuing Education as a legitimate home for a graduate degree program, one in which some of the staff have more legitimated research roles. As a recently retired member of this unit, I can assure you that there are considerable trade-offs, and that this presumed increase in credibility has been achieved at substantial costs

to those who straddle the two cultures of programming and academe. In the final analysis, greater acceptance of the Faculty of Continuing Education by the University of Calgary as a legitimate academic unit was achieved only because the product happened to meet the overall needs of the institution to demonstrate to its political communities that it was open to innovation.

I think it is to their credit that both Thompson and Blaney challenge the present notion of research and call for a broadened definition of what constitutes research in university CE and in the academy. Each, however, operates from the assumption that continuing education must use research to somehow transform itself into the beast that will be more acceptable to the Mother institution. This underlying assumption needs to be made explicit, and needs to be challenged. I would hazard a guess that both of these university CE leaders have gained credibility for themselves and for their units not because of their research prowess, but because they are effective administrators and practitioners, a point that Blaney makes clear.

Knowing that most CE practitioners will never meet the present criteria of "pure" academics, both Thompson and Blaney, rather wishfully I think, will that the academy be open to revised, inclusive models of what constitutes legitimate research. I contend that this will not happen in our lifetimes, and that the gap between practice and research will persist. After all, this is not a rational issue; what is at stake is prestige, status, and control. Those in academe, already under attack for "irrelevant" research, are not inclined to retreat from their defence of rigour and their protection of the scientific method. They are most unlikely to accept some "watered down" version of research, which will admit all kinds of riff-raff into the inner sanctum. Those who define what research is and is not still control the research drum; our choice is simply whether or not we really want to march to their beat.

We have for too long been slaves to the notion that by gaining institutional credibility, salvation will be ours. CE units are not likely ever to be welcomed as full-fledged members of academe on the basis of being "pure" academic departments. There are relatively few CE practitioners who are equipped, or have the inclination, to undertake the kind of research that is regarded as acceptable by academic standards. And the behaviour of most deans and directors, which is to increasingly hire subject-specialist programmers on separate, "non-academic" tracks, without graduate training in adult education (and often part-time), simply reinforces the implausibility of such a dream.

Happily, Thompson and Blaney show their pragmatic bent by concluding, each in their own way, that research in CE should serve practice, and it is here where I think we all agree. What is the matter with building better practice? If that involves systematic inquiry and research, however defined, so much the better. Rather than seeking acceptance and credibility using the old rules of academe, can we not reconceptualize ourselves as equal but different partners in achieving the university's greater mission of knowledge development, production, and dissemination? We have an important and specialized role to play in today's university. Our value is in not being like the others, but in perceiving and thinking differently about what learning and education are all about. Contemporary thinking about organizations suggests that effective utilization of different organizational talents and competencies is what is needed to meet today's challenges (Mink, Esterhuysen, Mink, & Owen, 1993; Senge, 1990).

If some CE staff wish a career in teaching and research, then there are means to do that: get an advanced graduate degree; apply for a research and teaching position or become an independent research contractor; join the appropriate learned organizations such as the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education and the Canadian Professors of Adult Education and their regional and international counterparts.

Rather than pursue the illusive dream of academic acceptance, university CE leaders should actively support reflective professional practice. Why, for example, should *CJUCE* continue to emulate other learned journals when there are many adult education and continuing education journals that already aspire to be "academic"? We need a Canadian professional magazine to update practitioners on relevant research and to share practice wisdom and experience. If the majority of readers, or potential readers, are practitioners, why not aim the journal at the practice level entirely.

Why not put our energy into positively connoting our unique differences and contributions to the university enterprise and into strategizing how to leverage those differences to help to achieve the overall mission of the university. Let's re-frame our vision of ourselves to become one of a community of practitioners that use all kinds of devices, including research, to build more effective practice.

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Biography

H. K. Morris Baskett has just retired as Professor of Continuing Education, The University of Calgary. Over his career, he has served as Administrative Officer, Assistant and Associate Director of Continuing Education, and Associate Dean (Research). He is a past chair of the Canadian Professors of Adult Education, a consulting editor for *CJUCE* and *CJSAE*, and a former member of the Research and Information Committee of CAUCE.

H. K. Morris Baskett vient de se retirer comme professeur d'éducation permanente à l'University of Calgary. Pendant sa carrière, il a agit comme agent d'administration, sous-directeur et directeur associé d'éducation permanente, et vice-doyen (recherche). Il est le président sortant de Canadian Professors of Adult Education, éditeur-conseil pour *CJUCE* et *CJSAE,* et ancien membre du comité de recherche et information de l'AÉPUC.