

# The Purposes of Adult Education: A Short Introduction

by Bruce Spencer (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Toronto, ON: Thompson Educational Publishing, 2006, 138 pages)

In *The Purposes of Adult Education: A Short Introduction*, the author presents a concise history and overview of the major issues in adult education and draws on examples such as Frontier College and the Women's Institutes to illustrate various approaches within the practice. Focusing primarily on Canadian and American philosophical viewpoints and examples, Spencer's overview ranges from "vocational training to social purpose education" (p. 7), including perspectives drawn both from institutionally based programming and from a social-movement framework.

Building on his work in the first edition of this book, Spencer organizes the five chapters based on themes within adult education. Chapter One outlines various perspectives on the purpose and foundations of adult education and provides a succinct overview of key Canadian historical initiatives that have influenced our practice. Chapter Two addresses vocational and employment-based training, identifying various arguments that support and question the role that adult education plays in developing human capital and strengthening the knowledge economy. Chapter Three focuses on issues and examples relating to the transformational role of adult education, involving perspectives from theorists such as Mezirow, Freire, and Habermas. Chapter Four, "Education for Diversity," addresses a range of topics including women, prior learning assessment, credentialing, and labour education. The final chapter builds on arguments raised earlier in the book by embedding concerns about access and accountability within a discussion on the growing interest in Internet-based distance education approaches for program and course delivery.

Spencer situates this book within our field's literature as both as a companion text and an introduction to issues in adult education. In identifying

contested issues and suggesting articles that provide additional background, he provides opportunities for readers to seek further information from which to develop a personal perspective. In addition to asking questions throughout the book, Spencer identifies specific topics following each chapter, in which he highlights the debate and provides additional comments on the issues. This approach creates a conversational style of inquiry that draws readers into the discussion and positions the book as an effective introductory guide to the diverse ideology and practice of adult education. From my perspective, there is a great deal of information in just over 100 pages of text. Spencer moves quickly from discussing community education and social movements to outlining the major principles of prior learning and courses offered by labour unions. Although this book is a fast read, I found it best to study it in small sections, pausing between topics and at the end of chapters to reflect and consider the various points the author makes.

In reviewing this book, I was particularly interested in Spencer's perspectives on the dialogical use of distance education programming for critical adult education and his challenge to adult educators to "influence this form of education" (p. 110). Through this critical lens, he summarizes the key ideas of the book by drawing from historical perspectives on the role of adult education in supporting democracy and the public good. In the final chapter, Spencer provides an opportunity for readers to consider the current "narrow" perspective that focuses on vocational and job-related coursework and suggests that our practice could embrace a broader vision similar to that endorsed by Lindeman and others who advocated for adult education as a vehicle for social change.

From my viewpoint, this book accomplishes its goal: it challenges readers to reflect on the principles and foundations of adult education, in order to stimulate further discussion, while testing their experience and knowledge "against the experience and knowledge of others" (p. 1). Throughout the book, Spencer makes it clear that no collective ideology exists within the field—by providing arguments and counter-arguments to claims, for example, that vocational programming is the "principle purpose of adult education" (p. 25). Instead, he presents adult education as a reflection of a variety of perspectives, ideas, and practices based on different theoretical frameworks embedded within situational and cultural experiences. By including readers in the discussion of the issues, Spencer's overview of adult education imparts adult learning principles, such as choice and self-directed learning, to them. As a result, his work is more than just a text for new practitioners; it provides an opportunity for those who work in the field to create space for reflection and to think about new approaches within the practice.

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