

Forum / Tribune

Canadian Adult Education: Still a Movement

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ABSTRACT

Writing recently in this journal, two of Canada's veteran adult educators contemplated the "death" of the Canadian adult education movement. I disagree and argue that adult education in Canada is as vital an activity as ever and one that still fully justifies being called a movement. Specifically, Selman and Selman (2009) list five trends that they assert have brought about the adult education movement's demise: a general retreat from collaborative activities and collective action; a concern about "missionary" activities; the structure, values, and rewards within universities and other institutions of higher education; a shift toward "lifelong learning" as an organizing concept; and the movement somehow becoming less Canadian. In this paper, I consider each trend in some detail and provide examples to counter the Selmans' analysis. Instead, I show that adult education continues to be a critical and vital movement in Canadian society and one very far from dead.

RÉSUMÉ

Dans un article paru récemment dans le présent journal, deux des spécialistes de l'éducation des adultes du Canada abordaient la « mort » possible du mouvement de l'éducation des adultes au Canada. Je ne suis pas d'accord avec leur point de vue et insiste sur le fait que l'éducation des adultes au Canada demeure une activité aussi vitale que jamais, et qui mérite toujours que l'on s'y réfère en tant que mouvement. En effet, Selman et Selman (2009) énumèrent précisément cinq tendances qui auraient causé l'effondrement du mouvement de l'éducation des adultes : un retrait général des activités de collaboration et de l'action collective; une préoccupation au sujet des activités « missionnaires »; la structure, les valeurs et les récompenses dans les universités et d'autres institutions d'enseignement supérieur; un changement de paradigme vers « l'éducation permanente » en tant que concept d'organisation; et la tendance du mouvement à être de moins en moins canadien. Dans le présent article, je reprends chaque tendance plus ou moins en détail et fournis des exemples pour réfuter l'analyse des Selman. Je démontre plutôt que l'éducation des adultes demeure un mouvement important et vital au sein de la société canadienne, un mouvement qui est loin d'être défunt.

INTRODUCTION

Writing recently in this journal, two of Canada's most renowned adult educators contemplated what they see as the "death" of the Canadian adult education movement (Selman & Selman, 2009). Specifically, they state, "in the span between the late 1920s and the mid-1990s, the Canadian adult education movement grew and flourished for a time but is now no more" (p. 15). Well, as my grandmother used to say, "Phooey." Certainly, since the demise of the Canadian Association for Adult Education in the 1980s, adult educators' influence on government policy—at both national and provincial levels—has waned and, despite the recent flurry of energy created by the Canadian Council of Learning and its Adult Learning Knowledge Centre, it has not proved viable to found another organization that reflects the full breadth and diversity of Canadian adult education or the extent of its reach. Yet, to someone who has spent the better part of 20 years (albeit far less than either of the Selmans) working as a Canadian adult educator and another 20 before that in similar roles in the United Kingdom and the United States, announcing the death of Canada's adult education movement seems a little rash.

From my admittedly partial perspective, adult education in Canada remains a vigorous and vital activity and one that still fully justifies being called a movement. And, I'm not alone in my assessment. In 2001, a team from the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) conducted a survey of Canadian adult learning. As their report (OECD, 2002) makes clear, almost 30% of Canadians participate in some form of adult education. The OECD review team was also impressed by many of the programs they visited:

Canada has many programs to be proud of, and many models in adult education that could provide inspiration both to other providers within Canada and to other countries. The sheer size of the country, the variations among provinces, and presence of both provincial and federal initiatives means that the country has a vast amount of experimentation and innovation. (p. 8)

This finding is also supported by the latest background report on the development and state of adult learning and education in Canada prepared for the Sixth International Conference On Adult Education (Council of Ministers of Education Canada, 2008) that documents Canada's rich tradition of adult education and learning and the wide range of learning opportunities for adults. As these reports and others show, more Canadians than ever are engaging in some form of organized adult education. The courses and programs they take variously include training provided by employers and professional associations for their own workers and members; union-sponsored training; training provided by governments to upgrade the skills of particular employees, or to allow individuals to change from one occupation to another; avocational and non-vocational programs especially for certain targeted groups like Aboriginal people, immigrants, the disabled, or the elderly; adult basic education (ABE) and literacy programs; programs concerned with advancing citizenship; community-based programs, personal interest programs, distance and online education, and welfare-related education and training that enables individuals to retrain and move into the economic mainstream and become self-sufficient. In addition, there are programs *about* adult education for existing and aspiring practitioners offered, at various academic levels, by universities, colleges, and professional organizations.

There is also a healthy cluster of organizations involved with various aspects of adult education and learning operating at national, regional, and local levels: the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education, the Canadian Association of University Continuing Education, Alberta Community Adult Learning, l'Institut de coopération pour l'éducation des adultes, Literacy Partners of Manitoba, and the Fédération canadienne pour l'alphabétisation en

français to name but a few. Finally, Canada has, for the past 10 years, celebrated International Adult Learners' Week (IALW) with events from coast to coast. Coordinated by the Canadian Commission for UNESCO, the week invites adult learners to share their fulfillment and successes, and provides adult education organizations the opportunity to showcase the contributions that adult education can make to lives and communities. For a flavour of some of the activities, look at the booklet *Opening up the Possibilities* (Canadian Commission for UNESCO, 2010). It's a stunning tribute to the continuing vitality of adult learning and education in Canada. And, while IALW might be coordinated by a government organization, it's really the product of community groups and non-governmental associations from across the country. This year's planning team included groups such as the Association of Community Colleges of Canada, the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment, the Canadian Association of Statutory Human Rights Agencies, the Catalyst Centre, the Conseil en éducation des Premières Nations, the Deaf Literacy Initiative, the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba, l'Institut de coopération pour l'éducation des adultes, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, the Movement for Canadian Literacy, National Adult Literacy Database Inc., the Native Women's Association of Canada, Toronto Adult Student Association, TV Ontario, and YWCA Canada. To my eyes at least, the presence, range and scope of these various adult educational organizations, programs and activities reflects and manifests enough commitment to a strong and active civil society to still warrant being considered a "movement."

Of course, opinions differ about what counts as a social movement or even what might be considered adult education; both are ambiguous and contested concepts. Without wanting to delve too deeply into the nuances of terminology, I understand "social movements" broadly to be large informal groupings of individuals and/or organizations focused on specific political or social issues and intent on carrying out, resisting, or undoing a social change. Social movements differ from political parties and advocacy groups and can be regarded as "collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities in sustained interaction with elites, opponents and authorities" (Tarrow, 1998, p. 4). Similarly, "adult education" is both simple to comprehend and complex to define. By it, I mean "all the approaches, processes, and activities having to do with the education of, and learning by, adults and the broad set of beliefs, aims, and strategies centered around the tenet that learning opportunities should be accessible to all, regardless of age, background, wealth, and status" (Nesbit, 2006, p. 17). And, as I suspect the Selmans' understanding of these terms is not too dissimilar, there remains a difference in our respective appreciation about what constitutes bereavement that warrants further investigation.

FIVE TRENDS

Selman and Selman (2009) list five trends that they claim have brought about the adult education movement's demise: a general retreat from collaborative activities and collective action; a concern about "missionary" activities; the structure, values, and rewards within universities and other institutions of higher education; a shift towards "lifelong learning" as an organizing concept; and the movement somehow becoming less Canadian. In this paper I will address each trend in some detail and provide, I hope, sufficient examples to refute the Selmans' analysis and instead provide indicators that adult education continues to be a critical and vital movement in Canadian society and one very far from dead.

A Retreat from Collective Action

First, Selman and Selman (2009) note that the degeneration of the adult education movement has occurred coterminously with a general decline in “more celebrated movements for social change” and a “retreat from collective action” toward more individual activities (p. 21). As examples, they cite Robert Putnam’s oft-quoted remarks about the drop in the number of indoor bowling leagues in the United States, the falling off of other public events where people gather “to signify their solidarity with a loose collection of causes” (p. 22), the emergence of sponsored public fitness events in major Canadian cities, and the waning of collective activities among rural First Nations communities. While the change in such occasions is no doubt true (and mostly regrettable), to claim they are indicative of a more general *zeitgeist* is misleading. Obviously, increased mobility; the rise of consumerism; advances in television, computer and other communications technologies; social networking; and the intractability of many social problems to more traditional forms of protest has led to a decline in membership in voluntary organizations and a shift from communal to more individual activities. However, to claim that such events are in some way indicative of a retreat from or a dissipation of social action bears closer analysis.

In fact, there is evidence to suggest that the opposite is true: levels of social action and protest are increasing. Some have even argued that we are experiencing a shift towards a “social movement society” in which protest is a routine part of everyday life (Meyer & Tarrow, 1998). Indeed, it appears that Canada is one of the countries where people are more likely than not to participate in social protest; a place where not only are the numbers of participants increasing, but they are also coming from more diverse sectors of society (Jenkins, Wallace, & Fullerton, 2008). In fact, a recent exploration of Canadian social movement activism finds that “protest activity and social movement engagement [has] undergone a rebirth, displaying levels of energy and vitality not seen since the 1960s” (Hammond-Callaghan & Hayday, 2008, p. 11). The authors list a raft of examples of issues to justify their assertion, specifically identifying environmentalism, gay and lesbian rights, and recent anti-globalization and anti-war protests.

Canadian adult education remains as involved in such collective action as it has been throughout its history. Indeed, it has been closely aligned to most of the major social movements since the 19th century, drawing

inspiration from the educational activities associated with the rise of labour organizing, the suffragette and women’s movements, with the peace movements of the many wars, with economic development in the Atlantic provinces in the mid-20th century, with indigenous struggles for self-determination and with social justice movements of anti-racism, HIV/AIDS, class privilege, diverse sexualities, dis/ability and anti-globalization. (Hall & Turay, 2006, pp. 5–6)

The vitality of the link between adult education and such concerns and allegiances cannot be conscribed to the past or seen as the dreamy musings of some old lefty. Read any recent issue of the *Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education*—the major Canadian journal in the field—or the proceedings of the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education’s annual conferences for proof. Repeatedly, journal articles and conference papers evince a deep concern for the roles that adult educators can and do play in addressing serious social issues through social movement activities. Each year the *Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education* publishes a list of people who have been awarded graduate degrees in adult education from Canadian universities and the titles of their theses. A sampling of this year’s batch reveals theses on adult literacy, education for immigrants and refugees, community arts-based programs for street youth and the homeless, Aboriginal education, ethical consumption, discourses and practices in local political organizations, workplace learning, faculty perceptions of social justice, HIV/AIDS,

and the place of faith in early Frontier College and YMCA educational programs. Clearly, social concerns and social movements and their activities continue to generate significant interest.

In addition, Canadian adult educators have been instrumental in establishing centres that carry out research on social movements—such as the Coady International Institute in Antigonish and the Transformative Learning Centre and the Centre for the Study of Education and Work in Toronto—and play an active part in many others such as the Centre for Social Justice in Toronto, the Caledon Institute of Social Policy and the National Anti-Poverty Organization in Ottawa, the Tatamagouche Centre in Nova Scotia, and the Pembina Institute in Alberta. In fact, Canadian adult educators often lead the scholarly exploration of social movements and their various foci and issues. Contemporary adult educators such as Shauna Butterwick, Donna Chovanec, Darlene Clover, Leona English, Tara Fenwick, Andre Grace, Shibao Guo, Budd Hall, Dip Kapoor, Jennifer Kelly, Elizabeth Lange, David Livingstone, Shahrzad Mojab, Kjell Rubenson, Peter Sawchuk, Daniel Schugurensky, Bruce Spencer, Joyce Stalker, Jennifer Sumner, Pierre Walter, and Michael Welton engage in exploring specific social movements and their activities. This list could contain as many names again and my apologies to anyone overlooked inadvertently. However, my point is that while certain sectors of society may indeed be “bowling alone” and irretrievably lost to adult education, there are other sectors still heavily engaged in such collective social actions as “large scale media events such as Greenpeace and other environmental groups have staged, or benefit concerts for victims of HIV/AIDS, or the creation of quilts by women to protest the building of an unwanted power station” (Hall & Turay, 2006, p. 7) that are not, and that create rich and sustained environments for adult learning, knowledge production, and educational engagement.

Missionary Activities

Selman and Selman (2009) next identify a “concern about so-called ‘missionary activities’ [where] . . . adult educators were promulgating a worldview that might not be in the best interests of all those on the receiving end” (pp. 22–23). In their opinion, the notion that “one group of adults can go out and educate another group . . . across differences of culture and interests becomes a matter of concern” (p. 23). Further, in the Selmans’ opinion, such an approach threatens the stability of organizations that promote such ideas and bolsters the view that to be effective, educational efforts must be closely aligned with particular interests and social groups.

I’m not sure that we should get over-excited about this. As I indicated earlier, adult education in Canada is broad and diverse enough to encompass a variety of approaches and perspectives. In any case, no one in a pluralistic democracy is in too much danger from being introduced to alternative points of view. Moreover, most adult education organizations I know are extremely reliant upon client and learner support, so would not have the luxury of moving too far away from their expressed needs and concerns. Also, assuming that one can successfully preach a contrasting worldview to unwitting adult learners does them a disservice. Whilst learners cannot be expected to know about specific subjects or how they might relate to other areas and broader issues, or even how such subjects might be best learned, to suggest that adult learners cannot, therefore, make reasoned judgments about what is important and what is not is both patronizing and demeaning. Most adult educators I know tend to adopt a learner-centred approach and focus on developing adult learners’ own understandings of any topic and its relation to their own particular concerns and interests rather than doggedly following any pre-arranged syllabus. And, I despair of those adult education professionals and policymakers who presume to speak for adult learners—especially those from socially excluded or under-represented groups—while explicitly ignoring or excluding them.

It's true that those of us with a more radical stripe do feel that a concern for learners' ideas and experiences should be extended into encouraging their skepticism about accepted orthodoxies. For many people, adult education is often the first place they systematically encounter others' ideas or those that challenge the mainstream. It is also a place where, contrary to much of their schooling, adults learn that their own way of seeing the world represents a valid place from which to start questioning commonly accepted beliefs and tenets. So, adult education can facilitate the development of a critical consciousness that fosters people's understandings of their past, present, and future, and can encourage them to appreciate and act to redress inequalities. Adults can be encouraged to ask such questions as these: What counts as knowledge? How is such knowledge produced and disseminated? Whose interests are being served by different forms of knowledge? Do certain forms of knowledge legitimate or privilege one set of interests above another? How might alternate forms of knowledge production be generated? If this is the type of missionary activity that the Selmans warn against, I would counter that it is more important to stimulate and provoke adult learners into asking their own questions than just have them parrot other people's answers to other peoples' questions. Besides, instead of ironing out complexity, radical adult educators should seek to celebrate it, problematize it, and make it critical. Radical adult educators ground their practice in the notion that no matter how bad things might get, people can always intervene, usually collectively, to improve them. They're highly suspect of what Jane Thompson (2007) calls "the wilderness of postmodernism" for its apolitical approach where

all mention of social class, structural inequalities, power and social control have disappeared from political and educational discourses. Talking about social class or women's oppression is now deeply unpopular because it implies conflict, barriers, exploitation and different groups competing against each other for limited resources. . . . In its place is a mixture of platitudes about individual opportunity and self-confidence and an empty arsenal of business jargon and psych-babble about targets and benchmarks, employability and skills, needs and goals and lessons learned. (p. 84)

The Role of Universities

Selman and Selman (2009) note an expansion in recent decades in universities' role in shaping the beliefs and values of adult educators. Their particular concern seems to revolve around the increase in the "professionalization" of the field brought about by the "dedicated graduate programs, academic faculty and large continuing education units" (p. 23). Although it's true that the number of university-based adult education programs has grown slightly in the past couple of decades and most universities continue to deliver some form of continuing education, whether this has produced the effect the Selmans claim is uncertain. Certainly, thanks to such programs, Canadian adult education is a much more considered activity than it used to be, as evinced by the growing number of books about it and the academic theses referred to earlier. Clearly, it's increasingly possible to now discover more about Canadian adult education and its various approaches and activities. However, the degree to which such knowledge has played "a much-larger role in shaping the beliefs and values of the field" (p. 23) would need to be determined by far more considered research.

The Selmans also allude to the positions of adult and continuing education departments in university hierarchies and their limited role in shaping institutional policies and attitudes. Readers of this journal will not need reminding of their own unit's peripheral role within the administrative architecture of their institution or the uncertainty that this can engender. Indeed, it often seems that university administrations rarely appear to agree on, or be quite sure of, what

adult and continuing education actually means, let alone how best they might organize it. So, the power that adult educators wield within universities appears to be limited. They certainly have had only minimal influence on university policies or practices, which in the past have often served to actively hinder or discourage adult learners. As a study by Nesbit, Dunlop, and Gibson (2007) shows, such barriers can include cumbersome enrolment procedures, restrictions on entrance qualifications, inadequate guidance and support systems, rigid scheduling, the rise of online registration systems, the slow acceptance of alternative prior-learning assessment policies, lack of access to a welcoming space appropriate to adult learners' lives and learning styles, narrow and unimaginative approaches to teaching, course content that ignores learners' experiences, unsympathetic faculty and staff, and fiscal requirements that limit the freedom to experiment.

Universities can be remarkably stable and resilient organizations, and they only change their internal systems and structures slowly (Clark, 1998). They are also uncomfortable dealing with informal modes of education and tend to marginalize educational activities that fall outside their conventional and traditional systems of delivery (Jones, 2001). However, as universities struggle to meet society's changing demands, they are gradually being forced to change. For example, changes in student demographics, enhanced public interest in university accountability, and reductions in government fiscal support and the concomitant threat of increasing corporatization have encouraged universities to re-examine their core activities. In particular, they are exploring their role in several areas of interest to adult educators: civic engagement and community outreach (Hall, 2009; Watson, 2007); challenging social exclusion (Preece, 1999); advancing citizenship, participation, and social justice (Harkavy, 2006); and the role of continuing education (McLean, 2007; Osborne & Thomas, 2003). To take just one example, Hall (2009) explores the potential of university-community engagement by locating current efforts in the pioneering adult education approaches of Ned Corbett, Moses Coady, Roby Kidd, and Alan Thomas. He suggests that, "in communities where institutions of higher education exist, the collective resources of those universities and colleges . . . represent our largest accessible, available, and underutilized resource for community change and sustainability" (p. 13). Speaking from a distinctly adult educational perspective, Hall adds that "this pool of historical memory and practical 'how to' information is not only invaluable but necessary and central to contemporary Canadian universities finding their way forward to meet the current challenges" (p. 21). So, it appears that rather than being overly influenced by universities, adult education just might be beginning to exert some influence in return.

Adult Education vs. Lifelong Learning

The Selmans also identify a recent shift from the concept of "adult education" to that of "lifelong learning" (2009, p. 24). What adult educators call their area of work has been a thorny issue for some time, and I don't propose to rehash the arguments here, especially as others (e.g., Aspin, 2007; Jarvis 2004) have presented excellent and coherent discussions of these and other related terms. Semantic clarity aside, the essence of the Selmans' concern is the potential influence of such terms on the policies and practices of adult education in Canada. So, what's perhaps most useful is identifying the functions that have been ascribed to whichever term is currently in vogue. In one early discussion of the uses of "lifelong learning," Bagnall (1990) highlighted four such functions:

- The preparation of individuals *for* the management of their adult lives.
- The distribution of education *throughout* an individual's lifespan
- The educative function *of* the whole of one's life experience
- The identification of education *with* the whole of one's life (pp. 5–6)

Most practicing adult educators, I think, would accept that those functions provide the *raison d'être* for much of their work. So, perhaps on the ground, terminology really matters very little. Adult educators continue to do their work in the best possible way regardless of what it's called. Although "lifelong learning is now a common taken-for-granted concept" (Jarvis, 2009), "adult education" has historical precedence and continues to be the term in greatest use.

However, as Selman and Selman (2009) allude to, terminology does have some effect in the policy realm. To the four functions listed above, Bagnall adds a fifth: "a fundamental transformation of society so that . . . [it] becomes a learning resource for each individual" (1990, p. 1). With this, we move into the territory of public policy and governmental decision making. Over the past decade, various government reports have repeatedly linked the broad needs of adult learners to a concern for a continuous system of learning development that will support Canada's economic growth and sustainable quality of life. Repeatedly, the reports identified the positive contribution that the provision of lifelong learning can make to the development of an educated citizenry and workforce that will benefit individuals, their communities, and Canada's national interests. So, in Canada, where "education" is a provincial and territorial responsibility but "learning" a federal government one, issues of jurisdiction, ideology, and resources become paramount. Who develops, oversees, and funds which programs become crucial concerns.

Because of its influence on policy formation, the distinction between "adult education" and "lifelong learning" thus becomes an area of jurisdictional contention. Here in Canada, as in other highly industrialised countries, governments have taken their conceptual lead from definitions determined by such international bodies as UNESCO and the OECD (Jakobi, 2009). Over the past 40 years, these two organizations have developed and promoted quite different worldviews on adult education and lifelong learning. Essentially, while UNESCO has promoted a humanistic-inspired paradigm of lifelong learning based on the influential report *Learning to Be* (Faure et al., 1972), the OECD's discourse has been solidly grounded in a much more human-capital and economic paradigm (Rubenson, 2009). And, as Canada has followed a politically neo-liberal course for some time, its national (and most provincial) policies on adult education and lifelong learning have been driven by the OECD rather than the UNESCO discourse.

This approach can be seen quite clearly in Canada's national report to the Sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA) prepared by the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada in conjunction with the Canadian Commission for UNESCO (Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, 2008). The report appears as a standard bureaucratic product providing a rather detailed description of adult education in Canada's provinces and territories and the extent of federal involvement. However, the absence of any analysis is striking and it becomes obvious that the authors of the report have been careful not to inject any comments or value judgments about the provision and outcomes of adult learning and education. As a consequence no attempts are made to identify any particular strengths or weaknesses in the current 'system(s)' or where improvements might occur. This is entirely consistent with OECD's approach, which tends to encourage an emphasis on certain aspects of adult education and lifelong learning (such as state functions and approaches) while downplaying others (such as critical reflexivity or learner participation). It can also lead, as Torres (1996) has suggested, to the adoption of an overly technocratic discourse that serves to depoliticise any emancipatory potential.

Further, in their analysis of both the report and the process that developed it, Nesbit and Rubenson (in press) identify five significant issues. First, the report reflects a *laissez-faire* attitude of Canadian governments toward adult education; there is no sense of urgency to create a mechanism for a coherent approach to it. Second, adult education tends to be subsumed under the broad umbrella of post-secondary education and therefore disappears as a separate policy

issue. Third, the Canadian report does not reflect an ability to engage in a discussion on how different policy levers can be applied to drive adult education in ways that would support governments' broader goals. Fourth, while the international discourse on adult education is shifting from exclusively addressing its role for the economy, the Canadian discourse seems to be more or less stuck in an economistic paradigm. Fifth, Canada appears to lack the structures and ability to engage in, let alone generate, a comprehensive national debate on these issues.

Given this, it would appear that governmental policies based on the ongoing traditions of Canadian adult education have been eclipsed. In its past, Canada has been able to claim active (and government-funded!) organizations devoted to the promotion and coordination of various aspects of adult education as well as other civil society groups with a less explicit, though no less committed, educational mandate. Over the years, such organizations have been advocates for much social and educational transformation particularly by challenging prevailing discourses and dominant practices and promoting greater equity (Hall, 2006). However, in recent years, such groups have either disappeared or waned in influence. Most of those that are left tend to be non-governmental organizations and specifically oriented towards either professional, social-movement or learners' issues. Operating independently, they have generally been less successful in influencing the underlying ideologies of individualism and managerialism and now tend to be conscribed to advisory roles on the margins of educational policy-making.

Yet, policy-making aside, the shift to lifelong learning has not been as reductive or damaging to the notion of an adult education movement as might first appear. The terminology might have changed but not the predominant critical perspective or what Selman and Selman (2009) term "the focus on equality and citizenship that characterized the adult education movement" (p. 24). Neo-liberalism may be the dominant political force but as Grace (2009) suggests, it has also spurred adult educators to envision broader conceptions and practices of lifelong learning. In practice, this has meant the Canadian Council on Learning and its Adult Learning Knowledge Centre had begun to move away from narrow conceptions of learning and education as the preparation of young people for the labour force and were promoting an approach to lifelong learning that is holistic and embracing social, cultural and economic perspectives. And, it has resulted in the recent inauguration of a Canadian Adult Learning Network designed specifically to engage Anglophone, Francophone, and Aboriginal stakeholders in the field of adult learning and lifelong learning in order to build a nationwide network dedicated to lifelong learning.

Being Canadian?

Finally, Selman and Selman (2009) note a "waning of confidence in doing things in a distinctively Canadian way" (p. 25). This seems to be a perennial concern among Canadians, perhaps partly explained by our colonial history, the close proximity of our largest trading partner and that country's effect on our social and cultural activities. However, to claim that the United States or any other country has unduly influenced Canadian adult education is highly questionable. For example, in comparison with our American colleagues, Canadian adult educators are frequent (and vocal) participants in international conferences and have played an active leadership role in international adult education organizations for many years. As a recent report indicates:

Canada's historic as well as contemporary engagement in the field of adult education and learning provides it with significant stature and credibility in the international community. Canada's efforts to share experiences and work collaboratively with other nations in addressing the challenges of the knowledge society afford it a unique leadership opportunity. (Canadian Commission for UNESCO, 2004, p.18)

Further, a recent volume in the *New Directions in Adult and Continuing Education* series brings together several Canadian scholars and practitioners to explicitly articulate a variety of historical, geographical, and political positions on the field of adult education in Canada (Cranton & English, 2009). Specifically, the authors address the uniqueness of Canada's emphasis on linking health and adult literacy, the use of pedagogical innovations to promote education in remote and isolated communities, the special language and cultural issues that shape Quebec's role in education and training, the emphasis on environmental issues and recent initiatives in community development. These concerns support and evince what one introduction to Canadian adult education calls its three main and enduring traditions:

- A set of unyielding social purposes, informed by passion and outrage, and rooted in a concern for the less-privileged.
- A systematic and sustained philosophical and critical analysis that develops the abilities to connect immediate, individual experiences with underlying societal structures.
- A keen attention to the specific sites, locations, and practices where such purposes and analyses are made real in the lives of Canadians. (Fenwick, Nesbit, & Spencer, 2006, p. 17)

These traditions portray the practice of adult education in Canada, not as the manifestation of a set of abstract concepts, but rather as part of a broader and vital mission for "really useful knowledge" that helps people create a more equitable world at individual, family, community and societal levels. Such traditions also delineate what I and others have recognized as a familiar trend at various international adult education gatherings and typified by a comment at a joint US/Canadian conference in Victoria where an American colleague was overheard grumbling, "I don't know what it is with these Canadians; they're all so critical" (Nesbit, 2006, p. 13).

What also seems to mark a distinctively Canadian approach is distaste for hyperbole and pretension, an un-self-focused approach and an explicit concern for others. Again, comparing ourselves to our closest neighbours is instructive. Despite their government's wide-ranging participation on the world's stage, US adult educators (with a couple of notable exceptions) have generally paid comparatively little regard to the global aspects of their work. Their conference topics and journal articles tend to focus on parochial issues or assume that their own concerns and approaches are universally held. Further, their comparative reluctance to participate in international conferences means that the development and promotion of ideas about adult education does not necessarily benefit from the insights of US scholars and practitioners. The upshot is that, unfortunately, opinions about US adult education become coloured by prevailing attitudes toward the United States in general. So, it can appear that, as a group, our American colleagues seem isolationist, self-absorbed, impervious to concerns outside their own national borders or, at minimum, reluctant to engage with the alien or not readily observed. Can anyone really claim that about Canadian adult educators?

CONCLUSION

Gordon Selman and Mark Selman's contributions to Canadian adult education over many years oblige us to take their opinions seriously, and I thank them for opening up what I hope will continue to be a productive debate. However, I strongly reject their contention that the Canadian adult education movement is on its deathbed. The evidence just doesn't support it. As I've tried to show, adult education in Canada seems as vital an activity as ever, so perhaps what *has* changed are the players and the notion of a movement? The complexities of contemporary life require different forms of social movements with different forms of communication. So, while

older scholars may see movements as consisting of, or encompassing, bureaucratized, managerial organizations, a new generation has now taken up the torch—one that considers movements to be looser and less structured groupings of the like-minded. In any case, adult education is far larger than any one organization or group and its life as a movement is contingent upon neither bureaucratic advocacy nor (thankfully) government support. Its vitality comes from the commitment of those who engage in it and the continuing social necessity of creating an involved, informed and creative society for all. This was well expressed by the great British adult educator R. H. Tawney over 80 years ago:

Words like solidarity, commitment, collaboration, transformation, liberation and allegiance should be properly reclaimed as a declaration . . . to make educational provision that is “roots and all” and “not cut off from the social interests in which it has its living and perennial sources” into a reality. (1926, p. 116)

So, as adult educators, while we may no longer enjoy the organizational clout of the CAAE, or at least the ontological comfort provided by the notion that some group somewhere has our collective interests at heart, we can still manage to organize and engage in a wide range of educational approaches, practices and theoretical discussions. Our main academic organization— Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education (CASAE) / Association canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes (ACÉÉA)—celebrating its 30th anniversary in 2011, still follows the same progressive and committed orientation as did the CAAE and is still led by what one observer approvingly called “populists, community organizers, social gospel idealists and democrats” (Friesen, 1994, p. 174). Our movement is still cognizant of and building upon its roots, still describing itself as part of a continuing tradition, still committed on both professional and practitioner levels to Canada's long-term educational and societal development, still engaged with the moral, social, and political concerns that engage Canadians, still attracting those who want to learn about its history, philosophies and approaches and still following in the noble adult education tradition of encouraging people to learn how to better gain control of and shape the political, cultural and creative aspects of their lives so that they can “make history instead of trying to escape it” (Flacks, 1988, p. 288). What greater proof of a movement's vitality could we possibly need?

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