

# Reviews / Comptes rendus

## Remaking Adult Learning

*edited by Jay Derrick, Ursula Howard, John Field, Peter Lavender, Sue Meyer, Ekkehard Nuisl von Rein, and Tom Schuller (London, UK: Institute of Education, University of London, 2011, 252 pages)*

“Enthusiastic anticipation” is how I would describe my initial state of affect upon receiving this book to review. It is likely an understatement to claim that the field of adult education has indeed, for some time now, been seeking a “remaking,” a shiny, new image that better reflects the depth of theory and range of innovation necessary in the complex contexts of practice. *Remaking Adult Learning*, an edited collection of works, held much promise as an initial salvo to be fired across the bow of cynicism directed at questioning the relevance and viability of adult education in contemporary society. However, while there is much to praise in this volume, it does not, alas, fulfill the promise of its bold title.

The sheer number and variety of entries are guaranteed to ensure that the “something for everyone” approach of compilations of this sort is successful. With 26 chapters sequenced across 252 pages, some chapters will necessarily be akin to well-constructed statements of position or brief summaries of the state of the art (e.g., “Adult Learning and the ‘Learner Voice,’” by Chris Jude), while other, more lengthy treatments may strike one as reconstituted journal articles (e.g., “Participation, Life History and Perceived Changes in Basic Skills,” by Stephen Reder). To say the least, this makes for an “interesting” reading experience in that chapter titles that may initially intrigue will sometimes disappoint, many often without the depth one would expect; one often wishes particular authors would have further developed their ideas, expanded their theses, or provided additional evidence for claims forwarded. Other pieces included somewhat lengthy data reports that, in this author’s opinion, needed further refinement, summarizing, editing, etc., for a book of this sort; these might be appropriate for a journal but do not necessarily make for pleasant reading, especially when contrasted with the briefer chapters.

The book is nicely organized into five discrete sections (“Participation and Equality: Does Adult Learning Make Any Difference?”; “Adult Learning and Social Movements”; “Adults Learning, Adults Teaching”; “Adult Learning and Policy”; and “Don’t Look Back: Remaking Adult Learning”), some with obviously more descriptive titles than others. Many of the chapters were engaging and highly relevant for the practitioner, despite the almost exclusive focus on the UK context (the European Union, especially Germany, Africa, and a few other global contexts are mentioned as well). There are many journeys through the more recent history of adult education in those contexts and the authors not only provide entertaining landscapes of the

“who’s who” but also underscore the importance of those contributions. Many of the “lessons learned,” combined with the pleasing variety of critical reflections, make for engaging reading. Importantly, there are numerous examples outlining not only how adult education has sometimes stumbled, but also how it has stepped up to its historical role as a catalyst for change on individual, community, societal, and global levels.

Throughout the book, there is also a consistent theme that echoes how we need, perhaps as never before, leaders who will combine their creative vision with effective and socially conscious practices and programs.

While *Remaking Adult Learning* may fall short of its optimistic title, it does provide readers with a smorgasbord of perspectives, reports, research summaries, and policy implications relevant to expanded discussions of current and future directions in the field. It has always been important for practitioners to stay abreast of what is happening in adult education, in contexts outside their own familiar territory, and, in part, this book fills that need.

*Remaking Adult Learning* is clearly an outcome of many points of intersecting collaborations and professional associations. However, the focus on Alan Tuckett’s albeit substantive and impressive contributions to adult education (I have a new term now: “Tucketting”), together with the focus on the role and specific sponsored projects of the National Institute of Continuing Adult Education, the Institute of Education, and others, makes the book seem somewhat parochial in scope and occasionally lacking in depth. Also, if “sampling the smorgasbord” is what you are seeking in a book, then this is one for you. However, I’m not sure the format applied here works for this medium, namely the printed book. Maybe I’m old-fashioned, but variable depth and scope—the “bits ‘n’ bytes” blog-esque approach, if you will—doesn’t work for me in a book; I want a well-organized, comprehensive, deeper treatise of an issue or topic area. More often than not, I was left feeling *Remaking Adult Learning* was too scattered, as if it had been pulled together from a variety of associates and quickly organized into a book format. But maybe that’s just me.

However, one of the core strengths of this book is that it offers practitioners in university continuing education a sampling of adult learning praxis that reflects the important synergy between theory, programs, policies, and purposes. Importantly, there is an emphasis throughout on the critical role of *evidence*, as documented and articulated by research, to undergird and make relevant the adult learning enterprise in all its dimensions. In both developed and developing communities, in regions, nations, and global contexts, adult learning initiatives, within the context of limited resources and competing attentions, need the support of evidence-based practices; that support must be in the form of good research, well publicized to an informed public, and this book underscores this fact in spades.

Finally, one of my favourite quotes—and there are many pithy and memorable ones to be extracted here—is a summary, provided by Paul Stanistreet, of David Puttnam’s commentary regarding the dynamic between education and catastrophe: “The future looks increasingly like a ‘war’ between ‘our failed past and the possibility of a far more imaginative future’” (p. 175). He goes on to claim, and I agree, that “improving the quality and relevance of education, to make the society of the future more creative, resourceful and engaged, demands that we raise our expectations all round, and, critically, realize the massive potential of digital and online technologies.” I think these lofty admonitions are useful, even necessary, to prod us toward new visions for the role of adult learning in civil societies; harnessed with creative, effective, and responsible adult education initiatives and programs, as outlined in *Remaking Adult Learning*, these make possible the informed action and large-scale social change, the powerful potential outcomes of adult education that are not only exciting to contemplate but critically important to actualize.

Reviewed by Dirk Morrison, University of Saskatchewan