

# Don't Mourn, Organize: A Response to Scott McLean

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## ABSTRACT

In the Fall 2007 issue of *CJUCE*, Scott McLean reviewed and analyzed the public claims made by university continuing education (UCE) units about the purpose of their work. He hoped that his survey would promote informed reflection and dialogue about these purposes and generate debate about the future direction of UCE in Canada. This article takes up that challenge and suggests ways in which we might rekindle some of the earlier passion and commitment to a broader and more explicitly social orientation.

## RÉSUMÉ

Dans l'édition de automne 2007 de la *RCÉPU*, Scott McLean a fait la revue et l'analyse des énoncés publics faits par des unités d'éducation permanente universitaire (ÉPU) sur le but de leur travail. Il espérait que son sondage ferait la promotion d'une réflexion et d'un dialogue informés sur ces buts, et susciterait un débat sur la direction future des unités canadiennes d'ÉPU. Dans cet article, Nesbit répond à ce défi et suggère des façons par lesquelles nous pourrions raviver la passion et l'engagement d'antan vers une orientation plus élargie et plus explicitement sociale.

## INTRODUCTION

Scott McLean's (2007) comprehensive website survey of the purposes of continuing education has helped me out. When I'm asked about my work, I usually say something broad about developing and managing continuing education in a university. That often ends the conversation. But if the persistent (or foolhardy) go on to query what that actually means, I launch into a potted history of the adult education and extension movements in Canada and Great Britain and the proud 100-year-old tradition of universities opening their doors and providing opportunities to the educationally and socially disadvantaged. Most people I talk to tend to regard this educational approach as just a way for people to land a better job or otherwise improve their personal life chances. However, I always throw in some comments about education as a way of enhancing citizenship or developing greater social awareness and providing a critique of dominant cultural and political phenomena and processes—something along the lines of while the individual benefits of continuing education are, of course, very important, so are the confirmation of people as social beings and the recognition that education can help people become agents for building a just society. In other words, education should not teach people merely to adapt to or cope with their circumstances but instead explore ways to challenge the existing order of things or what oppresses them. I often conclude with a few remarks about the essential role of universities in helping create what we now call “a learning society” by providing spaces for public debate and critical consciousness about these and other issues—and not just for the academic elite or already privileged but for all people, especially those labelled “disadvantaged.”

I never feel completely satisfied with these conversations; there's either too much to say in the few minutes allowed or my comments founder somewhere between the polarities of social justice vs. economic enhancement. Or, even worse, my companion starts on a diatribe about how universities suck and what a miserable time they had there and how they'd never think of going to one again or how they're bastions of privilege that perpetuate social inequalities and normalize oppression through codifying knowledge. (These latter comments tend to come from people who work in universities!). So, Scott's summary of what other Canadian continuing educators do, and how and why they do it, has given me much sharper language for my two-minute conversations. Yet, his work also accentuates a problem: the discrepancy between rhetoric and practice.

As Kreber and Mhina (2005) documented, educational institutions are complex organizations and it's important to recognize that what their mission statements say is not always a good guide to what these institutions do. They cite one leading British scholar of higher education who, somewhat

cynically, criticized many university mission statements for being either “trite and bland, failing to demarcate different activities of institutions or ... so detailed and specific [as to] impede autonomy” (Barnett, 1994, p. 55). In their analysis of Canadian universities, Kreber and Mhina made three other significant comments. First, they identified that mission statements tend to refer to institutional *goals* far more than to any *process* about how such goals might be achieved or even how lifelong learning might be facilitated. Second, they noted that mission statements tend to focus on the personal and human-capital dimensions of lifelong learning to the relative exclusion of other, more-social dimensions. Finally, they questioned the extent to which such statements are enacted in institutional practices at various levels. I believe that all inconsistencies between educational rhetoric and practice should be identified and confronted, especially when they occur in academic institutions that claim to promote lifelong learning. Otherwise, what initially might be minor differences run the risk of becoming institutionalized and regularized as part of the status quo and thereby rendered more difficult to examine or challenge. Although continuing educators are probably better than most at matching words and actions, Scott McLean concluded his article by alluding to some potential discrepancies between our practices and the explicit and implicit purposes behind them. So, in the spirit of self-reflection and encouraging further debate, I'd like to use the rest of this space to add my two cents worth to his comments.

## RETHINKING UCE PRACTICES AND PURPOSES

In many ways, the questions that Scott McLean raised are far from new, although the persistence of such comments (and from someone so experienced) is troubling. We've anguished over our purposes many times before and it's a rare issue of *CJUCE* that doesn't contain some such hand-wringing. Dennis Haughey (2006), one of our more trenchant commentators, has critiqued Canadian continuing education's loss of focus on promoting social change. He cites as factors our intellectual passivity and our reluctance to either engage with new sites of practice (especially outside the university) or develop intra- and extra-mural alliances to better promote outreach. As he put it, the Canadian university extension movement “has largely failed in positioning itself to anticipate the shifts in society that situate the learning agenda and the intellectual capital to pursue it ... [and] appears to have been unable or unwilling to change itself fast enough to keep pace” (pp. 305–306). Many of us may agree with this comment but don't know where to start to address such concerns or feel the task is overwhelming. However, if we are ever to change things, we need to do more than mourn the loss of past certainties or bemoan our current situation. Instead, we must begin to act and organize for the future. If three decades of working in adult and

labour education has taught me anything, it's that nothing of any lasting value is ever achieved without collective struggle. Let me suggest some ways forward.

I should first note that the time seems ripe. Such distinguished observers as Peter Jarvis (1996), Chris Duke (1999), and John Field (2001) have all suggested that the concepts and approaches of lifelong learning and continuing education are increasingly becoming a tool for the reform and modernization of education and training systems. Particularly, governments are encouraging universities and colleges to develop lifelong learning to address three fundamental objectives of education: personal development, social cohesion, and economic growth. In Canada, several recent reports have detailed the skills and learning challenges that our country faces, while simultaneously reinforcing the call for all qualified Canadians to have access to high-quality post-secondary education (e.g., Canadian Council on Learning, 2006; Human Resources Development Canada, 2002; Industry Canada, 2002). These reports acknowledged the broad needs of adult learners and linked those needs to a concern for a continuous system of learning development to support Canada's economic growth and a sustainable quality of life. And, they're not just talking about credit-based programs. Repeatedly, the reports identified the positive contribution that a broad provision of lifelong learning and continuing education within universities and other post-secondary institutions can make to the development of an educated citizenry and workforce that benefits individuals, their families, and their communities, as well as our national interests. Of course, we don't have to uncritically base our work on government reports that often seem to promote and valorize neo-liberal policies that run counter to and threaten many of the values and purposes of Canada's public universities and their continuing education units. Yet, we do need to acknowledge that, although we might not necessarily like it, notions of "academic capitalism" and the "entrepreneurial university" are certainly on the rise (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

So, even though opportunities exist, we face some formidable obstacles in addressing them. Partly, this is because our institutions, while offering mission statements and reports extolling continuing education and lifelong-learning approaches, rarely match their praise with adequate practical support. This ensures that in higher and post-secondary education policy circles at both provincial and federal levels, any mention of continuing education all but disappears. For example, recent searches of the websites of the ACCC and AUCC—Canada's national associations of universities, colleges, and institutes—for references to continuing education or lifelong learning yield few results. Nor do the two associations detail any institutional approaches to meeting the challenges laid down by the various government reports alluded to earlier. This dearth of awareness has further ramifications.

Although CAUCE should be congratulated for maintaining its national and regional meetings of continuing education deans and directors, how many of those gatherings include anyone from a federal or provincial government body charged with fostering lifelong learning? For that matter, does anyone from a community-based organization or representatives of a social movement ever get invited? So, as a collection of individual institutions or an organizational association or even an educational movement—call us what you will—we lack not only an effective voice but also committed champions at many levels of political, social, and civic life. Yet it doesn't have to be like this; just consider what happens elsewhere. For example, Osborne and Thomas (2003) catalogued recent developments in university continuing education in some 30 European countries and, even without going into much specific detail, it was obvious that our European colleagues were deeply involved in research and policy discussions about a wide range of issues relevant to lifelong learning and continuing education. Closer to home, Cantor (2006) and Cervero (2001) each documented the sustained growth of continuing professional education within and beyond American universities. If our counterparts in other countries can stimulate a broader interest and involvement in continuing education, why can't we?

The current peripheral positioning of continuing education units in the organizational architecture of our universities makes them overly susceptible to shifts in power differentials. Our capacity to effect change is often more dependent on individual and personal, rather than structural, relationships. This is a clear weakness: leaders come and go; climates change; financial concerns tend to trump personal loyalties; and in a situation of chronic underfunding, development expenses usually must be met on a cost-recovery basis or supported by existing student fees. As a consequence, continuing education units tend to be reactive, as well as more conservative and risk-averse. Opportunities to adopt a more proactive approach or follow a broader or more-social orientation are circumscribed by financial exigencies and the expectation to not depart too far from university norms. However, opportunities still exist even within such a limiting environment. Recent debates about the role of universities within society have highlighted concerns for institutional accountability that speak directly to an area where we can certainly claim some knowledge and experience: civic engagement and community outreach (Bjarnason & Coldstream, 2003). In the United States, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching is currently developing a national classification system for post-secondary "institutions of community engagement"; the accompanying framework allows institutions to engage in a process of internal inquiry and document their community-engagement activities (Driscoll, 2008). Although there's no direct equivalent to the Carnegie Foundation in Canada, could we not take advantage of

such an initiative to better promote our activities and demonstrate some leadership within our respective institutions?

Another practical opportunity exists in rethinking how to reposition the breadth and vitality of our programming within a more overtly academic orientation (a key currency of university recognition). Here again, there are some complications to overcome. We might promote and extend the (admittedly too few) graduate courses currently on offer about continuing education and enhance them to convey a sense, or vision, of how our professional practices might contribute to a broader intellectual or social mandate. The issue is how to present professional practice within a more explicitly academic framing. To be fair, we also have to work to counter the impression of continuing education that exists within many faculties of education that still adopt overly narrow and technocratic approaches to education and educational research and policy formation. We must work with our colleagues to ensure that the discourses of continuing education and lifelong learning get a proper airing. Among all the teacher-education and educational-leadership programs, the recognition that there are sites of learning other than schools or that adults might learn differently or might want to learn different things seems almost heretical. Yet, surely it's up to us to change those perceptions—through our programming activities, certainly, but also by promoting the academic study of continuing education and by conducting and publishing research about it. During the past few years, I have served on a number of research adjudication committees for the SSHRC (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council), the Canadian Council on Learning, and HRSDC (Human Resources and Social Development Canada). Despite repeated calls for research on continuing education, I can count the number of proposals in single digits. Such paucity is certainly not unique to Canada, however. Look at the program of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), arguably the major educational research conference in North America. Among the over 1,000 conference presentations listed in its 2008 program, only 25 abstracts refer in any way to “adult education,” “lifelong learning,” or “university extension” and none to “continuing education.” Can we not generate more questions, concerns, or enthusiasm than this? Research clearly offers us opportunities to consider our field in systematic and deliberate ways, but it also allows us to demonstrate our relevance to (and even collaborate with) the wider world. Plus it stands a good chance of enhancing our scholarly reputation within the university. And one certainly doesn't need to be a tenured faculty member to do it!

A further opportunity exists in strengthening our links with like-minded and interested groups outside the university. The history of Canadian university continuing education is full of examples of creative university/community partnerships that have promoted social change and awareness, often

in economic and social climates far harsher than those we currently endure. Some regard this as imperative: the last major study of UCE in Canada claimed that it “has a social and community mission that must be fulfilled if it is to be true to its cause” (Brooke & Waldron, 1994, p. 2). Yet, how many of us currently feel we’re fully living up to this mandate? Clearly, appreciating earlier efforts and concerns helps us understand and engage with present uncertainties and can create a sense of solidarity with the future. In this way, times of crisis can also offer golden educational possibilities. Our location as one very public face of the university gives us unparalleled opportunities to form bridges and allegiances with a wide range of external groups and communities, a position not readily assumed nor easily appropriated by others. Forming such links allows us to identify and partner with groups and organizations to build support for and create a vision of a more community-oriented and socially related practice of continuing education. Our roles as educators can also help us generate ideas about how such a vision can be encouraged, realized, and sustained.

As any politician will acknowledge, words are easy, actions much less so. In his 2007 Forum article, Scott McLean gave us a good picture of who we are—so far, so good. Yet, I share his interest in also what we might become. Of course, not all the suggestions I’ve outlined are immediately achievable and some will resonate more clearly within different institutions. However, my experience with external reviews at my and other universities has impressed on me the value of periodic and honest self-examination. I’m grateful to Scott McLean for starting what I hope will become a much larger reflective discussion. To embark upon such a process collectively requires confidence, trust, and a leadership committed to change. To be honest, I’ve noticed this latter aspect is a bit on the wane lately. Without meaning any disrespect to my colleagues, I’m concerned that our current conservatism is fostering an overall orientation toward administrative, and away from visionary, leadership; simply put, we are managing what is, rather than dreaming of or organizing for what might be. I believe that most of us come into continuing education with a drive and commitment to change things for the better but, for many of us who assume more senior roles, it’s easy to become absorbed and weighed down with day-to-day fiscal and managerial concerns, our hopes and visions deferred for a less-stressful time. Perhaps there’s an opportunity here for CAUCE to play a greater developmental role. How many training or mentorship programs are there for current or emerging UCE administrators and leaders in Canada? How successful are they? How many address the social dimensions of our work or the need for visionary leadership or how to create a culture of innovation and commitment?

Because we work as educators, we can view these issues through an educational lens. Myles Horton, one of the greatest adult educators I’ve known,

once said that any successful educational endeavour has to start with peoples' understandings of their own problems and where they want to get to. He also stressed the vital importance of keeping moving: "That's the most important single thing: to know what direction in which to move. Otherwise you go around in circles" (quoted in Jacobs, 2003, p. 261). As continuing educators, we can keep going round in circles, lamenting how it used to be in the good old days. Or we can start moving forward and organizing for a different future. Now that Scott McLean has raised these issues and *CJUCE* has published his concerns, some evidence seems to exist of a willingness to begin to rekindle our past passion and commitment and to use that energy to develop continuing education programs and activities that create a better world for all. The next question is: When and where do we start?

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