

Reviews / Comptes rendus

Curriculum Development for Adult Learners in the Global Community Volume 1: Strategic Approaches

edited by Victor C. X. Wang (Malabar, FL: Krieger, 2008, 262 pages)

In the words of editor Victor Wang, this collection of stimulating essays sets for itself the ambitious goal of providing “a current, practical, international, and adult learning based approach to designing and developing curriculum in the field of vocational and adult education” (p. 2). To this end, the eight chapters by different contributors examine the role of curriculum development in adult education from past approaches to future projections and from theoretical constructs to practical applications.

This is a timely work, as adult education plays an increasingly important role in the 21st century. As most of the chapters in this book emphasize, effective and high-quality adult education is in greater and greater demand in our globalized world. At its best, adult education should provide marginalized people with access to learning, as well as help those with skills to update and enhance knowledge they already possess. For practitioners who believe that they should be aware of the theories underlying curriculum development and the implications and goals implicit in different strategies, this book is a useful tool.

Many of the chapters refer to the two major theories underlying adult education—one generally categorized as humanist, the other as behaviourist—as the starting points for understanding contemporary trends. The concept of andragogy, made popular by Malcolm Knowles, posits the adult learner as being self-directed and actively involved in the learning process. This theory has been seminal in its influence for several decades. However, both Lisa Baumgartner and Lara Bierema point out in their chapters that Knowles’s model has been criticized recently for having a western bias, promoting individualism, and lacking a social-change perspective. Progressive theorists such as Paolo Freire and his followers in the developing world have articulated a more engaged and emancipative perspective of adult education, seeing it as a force for empowering marginalized groups. Finally, while often touted in the literature, the humanist approach in reality may be less frequently applied than the more behaviourist approach based on Taylorist/Skinnerian principles.

Following adult education’s other main stream of thought, Judith Cochran’s chapter traces a behaviourist learning strategy characterized by “analysis, development, design, implementation, and evaluation (ADDIE),” which she claims has disappeared from international instruction (although, paradoxically, she cites several examples of its recent application). Cochran goes on to propose that advances in mapping brain patterns may lead to a new paradigm in learning. In

her view, brain mapping offers an approach that is free of cultural bias and applicable to almost all adults. It seems likely, however, that this view will draw some fire from humanist educators, who will object to such a purely physiological approach to learning.

Some unifying threads bring together the contributions and form the basis for a common approach to curriculum development for adults in the 21st century. All of the authors agree that the learner should be involved in the development and articulation of what is to be learned. Moreover, the creators of curriculum and the instructors who interpret it should constantly be engaged in a process of reflection and questioning as to their own practice.

Of particular interest is the fact that several authors refer to the importance of transfer of knowledge as a means to improve the learning process itself. Sandra Daffron et al., in their chapter on training programs for police officers and firefighters, demonstrate how learning was more effective when those involved had to transfer their knowledge to colleagues in the workplace. This element dovetails nicely with Mary Ziegler's chapter stressing the importance of work as a key context for learning.

Perhaps the one major omission in this work is the question of power and how far the progressive discourse of adult education can be translated into action. Wang states in his introduction that "our contributors maintain that curriculum development is shaped by contextual realities, and even politics." Although this statement seems obvious, it raises a crucial question for those who advance an emancipative role for adult education. For example, Cochran describes at length Egypt's adult literacy program, which connects individual and community needs and is seen as essential for the economic development of the nation. However, the chapter does not address the fundamental contradiction that if an Egyptian adult learner takes the liberation aspect of her curriculum seriously and uses her new-found skills to organize a trade union or write an article criticizing the government, she might find herself in prison. Although most, if not all, stakeholders in many societies are in favour of adult education as a tool for economic development, some have little interest in it as a promoter of personal or social liberation. This reality is something that progressive educators must confront in elaborating strategies, particularly in developing countries.

This thorny issue notwithstanding, the first volume of these essays is thought provoking and worthwhile reading for the teacher-practitioner.

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