 What is the State of Adult Education Research Today?

Adult Education is more integrated into the general educational framework than ever before. Issues related to workplace learning, adult and family learning, continuing professional education, and international development are almost constantly before the public eye. Yet, we must continuously ask ourselves, what are the unique contributions of adult educators to the public discussion on these issues? More specifically, the question is, what does adult education research do to help explicate the central problems facing those involved in any area of lifelong learning?

Today’s adult education research, as in the past, is primarily descriptive. This means that adult education “research” is still often based on a best practices model. Many articles describe particular programmatic enterprises in the spirit of sharing or diffusing innovations. While this is, of course, interesting to those working directly in the field, this type of research does not lead to broader generalizations or applications of research findings. On the other hand, there has been a shift in educational research in general, away from broad sweeping generalizations, and a new interest in the particular contexts that serve as the basis for understanding any event or phenomenon. Hence thick description leading to analysis are now elevated to a principal goal of research. The question remains, how do we translate research into actual practice? I would almost venture to say that we have given up on this goal and the aim is now to translate practice into research. What then, does this say about the entire adult education research endeavor?

Looking through American adult education journals, one is struck by the emphasis on reflection and theory and the seeming retreat from the use of data, in any form at all. Whereas this is by no means universal, the principal purpose appears to be to move “practitioners” into a problem identification and problem-solving mode. While this aim is commendable, it is built on a model of either burned out or overly theorized professionals who cling to inappropriate models in the face of continual frustration. Alternatively, it also applies to overworked professionals who are filled with theory, but somehow cannot learn how to apply it. Somehow, the culture of those actively engaged in adult education efforts has been too often ignored.

In fact, one of the things that is striking about adult education is the paucity of teacher or more generally, practitioner research. While this has been a fertile area of research within education generally, adult education, with its exclusive focus on the learner has often bypassed this central aspect of the learning enterprise and has so far not really developed this area as much as possible. We have some first person accounts of how an individual experiences self-development and change, but little systematic study of the experience of teaching adults in a multiplicity of environments.

When we approach research, we usually have specific questions that need to be addressed. The questions flow from practice, from other research, from something we observe in other fields. It does not really matter the source of the initial question. Of course, this beginning is not a sufficient basis for research, and here I believe is the central problem. We have a question that needs to be answered. We recognize the question arises from a particular context and therefore, the answer needs to come from the context as well. But then, for some reason, we are unable to adapt current research to our own individual circumstances. Somehow, we fail to move beyond our own particular context thus inhibiting the utility of much research in the field. We need to know not only what worked in a specific situation, but why it worked and it is here that adult education research fails miserably. Hence, the research remains atomized and not generally constructive.

Because of the fluidity of its self-definition, adult education has a difficult time building a body of knowledge. Research is fragmentary as so many researchers have consistently noted over the years. But even worse than the fragmentation of the research is the lack of consistency over questions. Hence it is all but impossible to translate research from one context to another. The current emphasis on contextual factors makes this task all but impossible.

Of course, an added dimension is the question of whether the improvement of practice in a narrow sense is at all appropriate to the mission of adult education. In this sense, adult education is more than a mission than an educational activity; it becomes a means for social change in a variety of scenarios. However, one person’s social change is another’s propaganda, so this is a perennially difficult issue with which adult educators must...
Discussion has been an important tool here. Today, educators are seeking ways to replicate the effectiveness of discussion online. One of the reasons that Mezirow’s theory of perspective transformation has become so popular I believe, is that it speaks to yearning among educators to put a name to the educational task that they consider the most crucial. The fact that we still have no idea how to measure or really study this phenomenon has not prevented us from embracing it, albeit with debate about its political implications.

So, while this effort to identify effective practices continues, the debate centers on various measures of student progress, rather than trying to understand the divergent contexts that make one approach more effective than others. We either fall back on platitudes or stay with the research questions that are tried and true.

Part of this stems, of course, from the marginality of adult education. After all, few people train to be adult education teachers and fewer still, make it their life’s vocation. Certainly we know much more about the administration, conceptualization, and effectiveness of programs, than about teachers.

Yet this marginalization issue goes beyond the issue of part-time teachers. As Joseph Kett put it in 1994, “Today, no one can plausibly describe adult education as a marginal activity, but professional adult educators have become increasingly marginal to the education of adults.” (p. xvii).

Whatever Kett meant here, and he himself seems to equivocate, this is certainly a powerful issue for adult educators to address. Within this statement, lies a central dilemma facing adult education, and adult education research in particular, today. Talk about adult education is everywhere. Others are researching literacy participation and methods, brain research, and even participation in higher adult education. Certainly, training and staff development have taken on a life of their own. As we see the concept of adult education splintering, we also see the principal organization, the American Association for Adult Continuing Education (AAACE) struggling to find a constituency. This struggle inevitably leads us to ask, what then is unique about adult education as a whole? Is there some reason for individuals to identify as adult educators? Where is the strength of this research lens? It probably lies in the ways that adults learn, change, and grow. It lies in the strength of seeing not only the learning context, but the individual’s context; focusing on the learner and not entirely on the process; and finally embracing and implementing a conceptual framework that goes beyond both the present emphasis on the self and the past emphasis on procedures. There is room for optimism, but to escape complete marginality, adult educators must begin to shift their research agendas.

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References