

# CHALLENGING TIMES FOR ADULT LEARNERS AND EDUCATORS

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## **ABSTRACT:**

*Contemporary practices in adult education focus primarily on the vocational needs of individuals. This fragmented, industry-driven and competency-based approach is not reflective of the grassroots historiography of adult education. This paper emphasises the need for adult educators to recognize and reclaim the connection that adult learners have to their broader context of community and culture.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

At a recent conference hosted by the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology, in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, I had the pleasure of listening to Doon Wilkins, a well-known speaker and songwriter. Making reference to learning, changes in the world of work and life balance, Doon conveyed his message with humour by asking anyone born before 1950 to reflect on the many changes that had occurred over the past fifty-odd years. Although I myself was welcomed into the world after 1950, I could still claim to be enough of a "baby boomer" to recognize many of the milestones he cited. We reflected on a time when television, penicillin, polio vaccination, frozen foods, Xerox, plastic contact lenses, Frisbees and the pill hadn't yet been invented. A time before radar, credit cards, split atoms, laser beams and ballpoint pens, before pantyhose, dishwashers, clothes dryers, electric blankets, air conditioners, and disposable diapers. Think about when closets were for storing clothes and not for coming out of, a time before househusbands, gay rights, computer dating, dual careers and computer marriages. Nursing homes did not exist, nor did FM radios, tape decks, electric typewriters, artificial hearts, word processors or yogurt. Hardware was hardware and software was not even a word. We were the last generation to think that we needed a husband in order to have a baby. Life felt linear then. Hard work sustained employment and thirty years later, one was assured of a decent pension. We knew that it made imminent sense to save for a rainy day. We understood that we couldn't run a family or a country by spending more than we earned. And so it was in 1950. Now, consider that the youth of today will experience five to seven times as many changes and their ability to deal with innovation, transition and loss will be tested to an even greater extent. This will translate to approximately eleven job

changes, inclusive of three skill-set changes. The young people are (and will continue to be) a more transient and transportable population. The sense of community experienced by living and working in a particular environment for a long time will be a myth told in the stories of their parents and grandparents.

Those of us born forty or fifty years ago are witness to the way these great changes continue to transform the contours of adult education. "Our disquiet as Canadian adult educators stems from our sense that "social liberalism," fought for by the pioneering adult educators in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s is unravelling day by day..." (Welton 1998, p. 369). Welton referred to an escalating work-less and care-less economy and to the quick fix, flavour-of-the-month programs that are primarily determined and driven by industry. Making reference to the need for a long-term vision versus short-term solutions, adult educators are called upon to consider that, in this day and age, we must be thoughtful, informed and critical in our actions. As cited in the *Performance and Potential 2001-02* report published by the Conference Board of Canada, "it is our values that will direct us as we choose our future in health care, education or family policy" (p. iii). If the Western world values power, profit and productivity over wellness, the gap between those who have and those who have not will only be made more visible. In response to these concerns, I will discuss economic and social relationships as they relate to future developments in adult education programs. I explore two seemingly simple, yet complex and interrelated concepts: individual and community lifelong learning.

## **IT'S A NEW WORLD OUT THERE**

The world is a dramatically different place from the 1950s. Today's adult learner can no longer feel confident that solid training and industry experience will secure employment for the long-term. How does this affect individuals who are rooted in a particular trade or vocation? I refer to the highly seasoned and experienced workers with years of expertise who find themselves referred to as "redundant." These individuals face monumental challenges, as do the communities that once sustained them. What determines community is more about relationship than it is about physical structure, however. I refer to rural communities, faith communities, communities at work,

communities of gender, communities defined by role and being in community with our physical environment. These same individuals once had a vision that was supported by a community, a society and an infrastructure that was relatively predictable.

Today's world holds little similarity to the world of yesterday. "Upwardly mobile," "flexible" and "transitory" more aptly describe the qualities sought in today's worker. What was once experienced as a sense of rootedness and history in one's community and workplace, has now been replaced by "the chameleon values of the new economy" (Sennett 1998, p. 26). This shift has greatly affected the development of individual identity in that it has become increasingly difficult to sustain any sense of a long-term narrative of identity and life history. This has contributed to individuals (particularly those in their mid-thirties, forties and early fifties) feeling that they are on foreign ground. I cite an example in Canada, namely, the current trends in our logging industry. Generally speaking, timber workers are second and third generation loggers with minimal formal education, who learned all that they needed to know on the job. With the restructuring of the industry in order to compete nationally and internationally in a global economy, what is to become of these individuals? Is it simply a matter of retraining in order to acquire new skills? I think not. What we are talking about here is the possibility of a total life transition; one that in many cases demands uprooting and separating from extended families and communities in order to secure work in another community. These individuals are caught in the tension between the old and the new. The ground that they stood on has given way beneath them, and the industry that constituted security now spins them into a vortex of uncertainty.

I am critical of government and industry for their lack of vision and understanding regarding the challenges faced by adult learners and communities. The scarcity of funding to support educational and community development initiatives has fuelled an unhealthy competition amongst program providers. Vocational training as dictated by industry has taken precedent over programs that promote literacy and citizenship skill development. The competition that prevails in response to the scarcity of funding has thrown individuals and communities into a state of chaos and has only served to widen the gap between those who flourish and those who fail. Precedent also maintains that in

times of fiscal and budget restraint, adult education programs and initiatives are often the first to be slashed. There is much evidence of this in Canadian institutions of higher learning.

This culture of competition and monopoly also plays havoc with individual and community relations. A lot of finger pointing goes on as, fuelled by the best of intentions, we blame one or the other for not "getting on" with what needs to be done. Whenever I point my own finger, however, I have to ask myself, "Where are my other three fingers pointing?" This is a humbling insight as it makes me reflect upon what I am doing as an adult educator to lobby for a stronger commitment to adult education programming and development in post-secondary institutions. Understandably, it is easy to claim fatigue and disillusionment but apathy will not accomplish what needs to be done. The historiography of adult education is steeped in community action and for this to be actualized, adult educators need to unite in a common philosophy. Our typical response is the espousal of a deep commitment to the promotion of programs, maintaining that this is the answer to the difficult questions that beg our attention. I question if we do, in fact, have clarity of philosophy. It is critical that we as adult educators dialogue with all stakeholders in order to co-create a philosophy that is holistic rather than fragmented, in our understanding of lifelong learning and community.

We face many difficult challenges. In Canada, for example, people have become increasingly disenchanted with political processes and policies. This has manifested itself in a significantly lower number of individuals turning out to vote. As stated in *Community Values In An Age of Globalization* (2002), (a publication of papers presented at a Calgary, Alberta, conference sponsored by the Sheldon Chumir Foundation) "in a country of over 30 million people, 5.25 million voters selected the winning political party as their governing choice." Canadian citizens continue to become less and less engaged in political and social affairs, at both the provincial and federal levels. This translates in our own communities to being a 13% drop in Canadians (in recent years) who once volunteered their time to charitable organizations. Individual disengagement and detachment is on the rise, and our world, constituted by our societies and communities, is clearly in a state of distress at an economic and social level. All of this translates into

hardship for individuals and communities. At this time of global economic and social unrest, we need to identify and draw from the values that nurture and sustain healthy relationships at all levels of our existence.

I maintain that the surest way forward to ethical, socially responsible and effective community program development is to acknowledge the critical role that community plays in both individual and collective lifelong learning. It is time to admit that our driven-ness and need for a rapid return on our investment (sometimes to the point of seeking total (program) cost recovery up front) thwarts our attempts to achieve all that we set out to achieve. If our eye is first and foremost positioned on the almighty dollar, we will continue to provide only short-term fixes rather than long-term solutions. Of course we need to consider the feasibility of our initiatives, inclusive of related economic considerations. If this serves to be the driving force, however, I fear that it will perpetuate the hit and miss initiatives and serve to further fragment our urban and rural communities.

How do we link individual lifelong learning to the greater context of community? "The word 'community' has old roots, going back to the Indo-European base *mei* meaning 'change' or 'exchange.' Apparently this joined with another root, *kom* meaning 'with' to produce the word *kommein*: shared by all" (Walker 2002, p. 159). Walker made reference to numerous connotations that surface around the word "community" but maintained that even though the images conjured up may vary in nature, the common denominator was that "on the whole they tend to be positive associations" (p. 159). What becomes clearly visible in Walker's description of community is the bedrock that supports the interdependence of relationships shaping the lives of all individuals within that community. A healthy community is one that deals sensitively with tensions to create bridges and not barriers. There are stories of great loss, sadness, joy and celebration made visible in the history of the North American pioneers who travelled West in search of a more prosperous life. These stories speak of how individuals gathered together to form a community in order to combat the droughts, the grasshopper infestations, the tornadoes and the civil wars. The community as a whole and its individual members were mutually dependent upon the support that each provided in order to survive.

I ponder the ethics that guide many of the adult education initiatives today and maintain that communities and individuals are at risk. I make reference to individual and communal relations that are plagued with violence and obsessed with individual gain and immediate self-interest. I suggest that current trends have separated the individual from the community and that this separation has significantly contributed to a deep sense of isolation, both individually and collectively. I maintain that we have forgotten that each individual is an integral piece of a much greater whole and that this greater whole is dependent upon the efforts and contributions of each individual within that whole. "Ethics calls for individuals and communities [to] care about the impact of one's actions on others - and the fairness of those impacts" (Bell 2002, p. 8). It is critical that adult educators engage in dialogue with *all* participants. Only in this way will the relevant questions and responses be revealed.

### **A Short Story of Nelson, British Columbia**

I would like to tell you about a small mining community which continues to thrive despite being threatened by extinction on many occasions. With a population of 9,700, Nelson, British Columbia, is encircled by the Selkirk Mountains and is situated on the shores of Kootenay Lake. According to the history books, the discovery of gold and silver put Nelson on the map in 1867. Only thirty years later, boasting a population of 3,000, Nelson was incorporated as a city.

Nelson is not on a road to anywhere else. There is absolutely no reason for anyone to travel through Nelson unless they have a firm intention to visit this small city. Needless to say, when the mining industry collapsed, Nelson had lost its mainstay and it could very easily have become a ghost town, like many similar towns in the area. There are many chapters in Nelson's story but what is most significant is that the people of this small city always looked forward to their next "life line." When the National Democratic Party was in power many years back, Nelson submitted a proposal to develop a small university. Nelson understood what the introduction of a small university or college could do for a small city. The government approved the plan and helped to support this development. Students soon flocked to Nelson as this was more appealing than travelling

to the urban centres. The economy was booming once again. This was short lived, however. The Social Credit Party assumed power and, intent on abolishing any initiatives developed by their predecessors, closed the university.

It is important to note that Nelson was a community of individuals intent on keeping up with the times and finding a lucrative use for the university structure, now empty. They decided to turn their attention to international affairs. Realizing that Japan had a great deal of money to spend, Nelson decided to develop and aggressively market a strong ESL program for international Japanese students. Once again, Nelson was on the map but now at an international level. This initiative was so successful that Nelson was soon twinned with Shuzenji, a city in Japan, and a theme park in Nelson's honour was constructed. This theme park is situated just two hours out of Tokyo. Named "Nelson – A Village of Canada," this theme park features reproductions of some of the original buildings drawn from the Nelson's history. Over a million Japanese visitors pass through this theme park annually.

When Japan experienced its own economical crisis the International English School for Japanese students was closed down. Intent on seeking new initiatives in order to survive and keeping in mind that the mining and logging industry in British Columbia had taken a severe beating, Nelson set out to secure yet another economic foothold in a shifting economy. Policies and enticing tax packages were developed with the hope of drawing artisans from all parts of Canada. In a relatively short time, Nelson became known as a thriving metropolis for potters, painters, weavers, quilters, poets, novelists and the like. Tourists came from everywhere, making a conscious choice to travel to Nelson in order to view the magnificent art. Building on the tourist economy and recognizing that the soft market was making people nervous, Nelson anticipated that investors would look to real estate as a better bet for their investment. Recognizing the beauty of her geographical natural resources, the people of Nelson allocated a great deal of time and money to developing recreational areas and activities. Today, Nelson B.C. ranks as the number one small town arts community in Canada.

It is not my intention to romanticize the history of Nelson. Clearly there were many curve balls and tensions. I tell you this story, however, as I believe it to be an excellent example of how a community worked together to reinvent its economy in order to survive. Some might ask, "Were the initiatives undertaken by Nelson not driven by industry and economic change?" The answer would clearly be yes. What is significant, however, is that Nelson responded to economic trends and shifts as a collective, as a community, drawing support from many individuals within that community, and allowing all opinions to be heard. The plans that evolved came from within the community as opposed to being dictated from potential funding sources, where there is always a power differential. Government and other funding bodies were invited to exchange ideas with the people of this small city, intent on seeking a shared understanding of philosophy and vision. This process was inclusive and today, Nelson and surrounding communities reap the rewards.

The Nelson success story raises many questions. Why has this small city been so successful? How has it been able to reinvent itself time and time again? What is the municipal infrastructure and what is the relationship with provincial delegates? How are relationships nurtured and sustained over time, within and across structures? Has natural leadership evolved out of the community itself and how was this encouraged? Who were the informal leaders? "Leaders...are intensely interested in the development of each individual, of the group as a whole, and of a more democratic society. [They] want to know each person, what they care about, and where they are trying to go" (Belenky, Bond & Weinstock 1997, p. 14).

Not all stories can claim the success that Nelson continues to experience. What detracts from success in communities that appear to be similar? Is the population more transient? Is leadership lacking "from within?" Are the natural resources not as appealing and pliable? It is important to determine what contributes to the success of communities that continue to thrive. How can adult educators, practitioners, policy makers and developers support communities that are floundering? What resources do individuals need so that they might continue to reside *within* their own community? I maintain that individuals and their communities, more often than not, know what they need. Rather



than continuing to rely on urban centres to house the majority of adult education programs, adult educators can play a significant role in assisting communities to articulate their own needs. In this way, more attention and resources will be allocated to communities so that they can house their own adult education programs; programs that will serve to sustain the life of that community, and support the learners within.

## **THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE COMMUNITY**

Many of the elements contributing to communities that survive the winds of change can also be linked to individual lifelong learning. Adult learners participating in academic upgrading and training initiatives, as well as individuals working in industry, are experiencing tumultuous times; times when the ability to reinvent and re-create is paramount. Many of the individuals have been shaped and supported by their communities. Their work was much more than a job; it was a way of life, a culture, a way of being in the world. The economics that supported them were intertwined with the social dynamic. The work that they have done served the lifeblood of their community, shaping their values and relationships. If we address only the economic needs of that individual when his/her work becomes redundant, we are sorely missing the point.

Adult learners need much more than the acquisition of entry and exit competencies required to master particular tasks in industry. Canadian research refers to skills that extend beyond literacy, numeracy and technology. This skill band is known by many names: employability skills; soft skills; life skills. Canadian employers emphasize the importance of these skills and adult education initiatives need to reflect the integration of these competencies. In this way, both the individual and the community will benefit. Many adult education programs in Canada claim to support this skill development but I fear that the integration has gone so deep that the acquisition of these skills is more implied than it is visible.

## REFLECTIONS

It is human nature to romanticize days gone by. I suggest, however, that the 50s were not so much a time of stability as they were a fleeting moment in time, a "time out," so-to-speak. Consider that the first 50 years were fraught with turmoil from WWI onwards and that we are now, once again, experiencing what might be described as the norm.

The philosophy and vision depicted in the historiography of adult education, once considered to be the norm, is not represented in contemporary adult education practices, however. This is a history that did not separate the individual from his/her context of community and culture. The individual and the community were understood to be inextricably intertwined and separating the two would inevitably contribute to the demise of both. Foley (2001) reminded us, however, that contemporary capitalism allows for both, if only we have the courage and commitment to create the spaces (p. 13).

It is critical to explore what contributes to the lifeblood of individuals and communities that thrive in this era of unprecedented change. What mechanisms and processes are in place to ensure that all voices in the community are heard? What are the relationships at a municipal, provincial and federal level and how are these relationships nurtured and sustained? How can dialogue be encouraged? How can we explore "what works" in a given community? How transferable is this to other communities? Or is it?

To address the needs of the individual we need to look at the whole person. We need to recognize the broader context of community that contributes to individual identity. Our contemporary approach to adult education is individualistic and vocational. This narrow approach puts societies at risk. To exclude skill development in critical analysis, informed citizenship, social awareness and facilitating change, ill prepares adult learners to function as contributing members of society (Cunningham 1993). Our own awareness of our communities will certainly increase our sensitivity to the web-like connections in the lives of all those whom we are privileged to encounter along the way.

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