



Foundations of Adult and Continuing Education

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Book Review

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Foundations of Adult and Continuing Education lays a foundation of the history, theory, research, policy, and practice of the amorphous expanse known in North America as adult and continuing education. Undoubtedly constructed as a resource for graduate students in the burgeoning field, this text lucidly summarizes complex and daunting theory without stripping the data of interest and nuance. That is high praise for what could have easily been just another bulky textbook.

Constructed of twelve chapters, divided into three sections, this work defines contemporary perspectives of the field, examines the foundations of the field, and focuses on the contexts of adult and continuing education (ix). The text gives a cursory summary of the historical rivalry between terms vying for lexical dominance of the then nascent field and while “there is still not a universally accepted definition today” one can trace certain themes and trends among the most noted definitions (3). The text presents different forms, purposes, and providers of adult education and even addresses the social forces affecting the expansion of the field (technological innovation, globalization and the global market, as well as seismic demographic shifts associated with rising levels of educational attainment, aging populations, and an increase in racial and ethnic diversity) (11-20). It outlines the prevailing historical patterns in adult participation and addresses some of the challenges that adult learners face, such as long waiting lists for ESL programs, limited formal educational background (especially among seniors [42-43]), the often-ignored relationship between social class and participation, as well as the influence race and ethnicity have on participation rates within adult education programs.

Perhaps the most harrowing statistics are those involving unemployed and underemployed

adults and the working poor. *Foundations* references the US Census of 2012 when reporting that 10.6 million Americans are among the working poor (59). According to this research, “women are twice as likely as men to be part of the working poor” and Hispanics and Blacks are “twice as likely as Whites and Asians to be among the working poor” (59). Educational attainment and working poor status appear to be linked as the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statics in 2012 reported that while only 2.1 percent of college graduates were categorized as working poor, “21.2 percent of those who had less than a high school diploma” (60) were categorized as such. Another startling revelation is related to the identity of adult educators.

Identifying the boundaries of adult and continuing education (ACE) as a field is complex and requires educators to define not just education but also adulthood (“a relatively new social construct in American society” explored in greater depth in chapter 7), and to work in a field awash in acronyms and associations. They must try to construct a sense of professional identity in a field which necessarily works within structures of power and simultaneously challenges those structures (108, 117).

Readers might be surprised by the inclusion of a chapter on philosophy in a text summarizing the history and vital components of what is commonly described as a predominately applied field. However, the inclusion of such is quite necessary considering that it is paramount to investigate “many ways of thinking” and the frameworks we use “for thinking about broader issues and social problems” (137). In fact, the authors describe philosophy in those exact terms. Coming from a religious studies background and being something of a theory-head, I found this chapter particularly engaging. It touches on everything from belief to Postmodernism and Critical Race Theory (CRT) and brilliantly illustrates the implications of such theory for the practice of education in general. The chapter, “Historical Perspective: Contexts and Contours,” is equally compelling because of its willingness to question the value of history for the field and investigate this history via its diffusion, “the spreading of ideas through newspapers, lectures, and academic and popular writing” (177). American history is intimately tied up with education and literacy: literacy and education took center stage during era of Reconstruction, illiteracy was viewed as a hindrance to the effort of the World Wars, and today, education and assimilation are still closely linked (191-192).

Learning about the limited role the federal government is allowed, constitutionally, to play in the realm of adult education (as explicated in chapter 8) is eye-opening. The few times the federal government has stepped into the realm of adult education has had to do with immediate national interest (adult literacy, English language learning, literacy for military, and even job training for women working in production to strengthen the war effort of WW II) (264-267). The chapter “Technology and Adult Learning” could be a separate book itself. The

protean nature of new technologies, the effect of technology on neural cognitive activities, and the dire need to develop “critical evaluative skills” in adults as well as in children in the age of the Internet are expertly addressed here (314).

The two chapters dedicated to the expansive landscape of adult education map the varied spaces and contexts in which adult education takes place. While one chapter focuses on adult education within more formal contexts (within work, where adult education overlaps with the territory of higher education, inside programs of basic education and ESL learning, and military efforts), the other traces the outline of adult education as it occurs within a community context (faith-based programs, adult learning within museums and libraries, wellness programs, and civic engagement groups – especially those rooted in social justice). These two chapters spotlight just how diverse in topic, motivation, and method adult education can be. For newcomers to adult education like myself, the crisp explication of the regions and modes of what constitutes the field is exceptionally enlightening, as I have previously found it difficult to isolate what in fact constitutes, and does not constitute, adult education.

While noticeably constructed with Education graduate students in mind, this book has something to teach anyone even tangentially interested in lifelong learning, community building, education, employment, and the effects of technology on North American culture. As an academic advisor working within the halls of higher education and a lifelong learner myself, I see this text as a great resource for graduate students and educators in all disciplines but I also recommend it to those invested in education and learning outside the confines of formal educational structures (church leaders, community organizers, volunteers, and policy advocates).

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