The role of adult educators: more than the grin on the Cheshire Cat?

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Paper presented at the 40th Annual SCUTREA Conference, 6-8 July 2010, University of Warwick, Coventry

Introduction
Yet again, ‘the role of the adult educator’ constitutes a theme at SCUTREA. Why might it be reprised? Does it represent normal everyday paranoia about the continuing existence of SCUTREA and the work of its members, or is there a real issue to be worried about? Like so many members of SCUTREA, our work in university programs for adult educators suggests that, on the one hand, we should be confident about what we do. After all, our positions are typically premised on the assumption that we have expertise in ‘the field’ and that this is clearly valued by those who seek it out. However, on the other hand, ‘the field’ has become so dispersed that our roles, along with those who enrol in our programs, are more difficult to define with any measure of confidence.

The University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) programs have kept the name ‘adult education’ but, like the university itself, have morphed, and re-morphed as a range of entities and been shaped by broader understandings, political agendas and national visions. Currently UTS offers Undergraduate and Masters programs badged as adult education with a range of majors as well as specialised associated programs. Students come with a wide range of experience. They may be working as vocational teachers, as human resource developers or organisational learning practitioners, as English language teachers, as industry trainers, or as workers in community-based organisations.

The point we explore in this paper, is how can we conceptualise our role in adult education when ‘the field’ itself is so diverse? Moreover, it is ‘curious and curiouser’ to think about our role in ‘the field’ before we can actually articulate what the field is? Is it like the grin on Lewis Carroll’s Cheshire cat, or do we still have a tangible practice to pursue?

“I wish you wouldn’t keep appearing and vanishing so suddenly; you make one quite giddy!”

“All right,” said the Cat; and this time it vanished quite slowly, beginning with the end of the tail, and ending with the grin, which remained some time after the rest of it has gone.

Well! I’ve often seen a cat without a grin,” thought Alice; “but a grin without a cat! It’s the most curious thing I ever saw in all my life!” (Carroll 1865)
Conceptualising the role of the adult educator is indeed ‘giddy work’ and in this paper we point to the difficulty of articulating ‘the field’ in any finite manner. Remembering similar arguments (for example Edwards 1997) we tentatively posit a less certain adult education landscape—albeit a much bigger, but much less well-defined field — aware that our acts of ‘boundary making’ are themselves acts of power. We create the field by naming what we regard as important in it. This problematic (but necessary) work is needed before we focus on the role of the adult educator.

**Adult education as an inclusive practice**

Adult education represents a strong tradition of second chance learning. In countries like Australia and the United Kingdom, the work of Workingmen’s and Mechanics institutes, Schools of Arts and Community Colleges etc. emerged specifically for the purpose of providing a liberal education to those adults who, for whatever reason, did not have the opportunity to benefit earlier (Tennant & Morris 2009). Adult education focused on provision for working class adults. These were originally men having neither the schooling, the income, nor the social capital to access the age-based, class-based, time of day-based educational opportunities of the time. It also emphasised the importance of a liberal rather than a narrowly vocational education in building an ‘educated man’. This ‘great tradition’ has a strong emphasis on social justice. As part of this, adult education continues to emphasise inclusivity. That is, those excluded from educational provision by virtue of their structural, social and cultural disadvantages should be included in educational provision, and if necessary, provision should be offered specifically for them. Like community development (Tett 2005), adult education has sought to include disengaged and disenfranchised learners. Its histories tell of struggles of and for; women (e.g. Lather 1991); economically and socially disadvantaged (e.g. Horton 1990); the working class (e.g. Newman 2000); and, people of colour (e.g. hooks 1994).

In short, adult education has an interest in including those whose experiences and circumstances were not privileged in formal educational institutions. To this end, the great tradition developed over time with adult educators who strived to ensure their pedagogical practices were also inclusive. This interest can still be seen today as we question our practices’ capacity to reflect and work productively with the experiences of all our learners, especially when the press of competencies and other aspects of vocational frameworks insinuate their way into our practice.

Part of this inclusive pedagogy is the particular acknowledgement and validation of learners’ experiences that are not the direct result of some form of teacher intervention, nor a formal curriculum. Many of these experiences do not take place in educational institutions. Libraries, museums, workplaces, communities, and other places have been recognised as valuable sites of adult learning. For example contemporary research is replete with examples of learning occurring beyond educational institutions – and, indeed, learning moments that do not necessarily include ‘a teacher’ (e.g. Fenwick, 2003).

These inclusive ideas about adult education have been taken up with relish on a much broader front than that typically represented as the field of adult education. The project of adult education has been extraordinarily successful, as its key emphasis has been embraced by so many other sectors of education. In the Western world, adult education thinking has colonised, at least in part, almost all types of sites in which people live and work. Extending the proportion of the
population benefitting from education has become conventional wisdom. However, this success has been accompanied by a shift in educational values. No longer is the educated person, but it is the productive person who has become the object of programs. Inclusiveness has become identified with a particular political agenda - inclusion means participating in the economic project of the nation and the learning involved must be subordinated to vocational ends. In the new public sector management ideology an investment of public money means accountable vocational outcomes that can be measured against benchmarks. What counts is exactly what a learner can do in terms of pre-defined standards, not what they have become.

We need then to judge adult education with respect its ability to cope with this changing context and consider what is its practice now? The diversity of the student’s background and interests currently enrolled in programs for ‘adult educators’ provides a possible answer to this question.

**Adult education as a dispersed practice**

The success of adult education has ironically created the problem we address here. ‘Adult education’ can be (and is) found just about anywhere. It is no longer possible (if ever it was) to imagine an insular and unified field of adult education. If we insist on such a field then we are also establishing boundaries and inscribing organisations and practices, in turn becoming deterministic in regard to who/what is (and is not) included (Edwards 1997:68). If we insist on an insular understanding of ‘the field’ then we also constitute and maintain borders – which is more about exclusion than inclusion. Rather, as outlined above, our concerns focus on inclusivity, and we perpetuate a much broader understanding of the adult education ‘field’. However, large numbers of the practitioners within this broader field do not imagine themselves as adult educators or see that the identity or tradition of adult education is meaningful to what they do, even if they are aware of its existence. Therefore, when we argue that learning is to be understood as located beyond educational institutions, then we are also arguing that ‘a greater multiplicity of activities is seen as involving learning and hence can be deemed educational’ (Edwards & Usher 2001:276). Adult learning has come to be understood as a ‘dispersed practice’ (Edwards & Usher 2008; Field 2006).

Positioning adult learning as a dispersed practice also means the people enacting these practices can also be found anywhere. In one sense an inclusive view of adult educators is that it can include anyone. Indeed, the occurrence of adult learning without the intervention of ‘teacher’ has not only been an issue for Tough in an earlier generation of research (Tough 1997) but also the topic of recent SCUTREA discussions (Rooney & Boud 2008).

However, locating ourselves in a position where adult learning is understood as a dispersed practice is bittersweet. On the one hand maintaining and perpetuating this position means that ideas from adult education have permeated all sorts of other professions. For example, professions as diverse as business, engineering, health, management, engineering etc are interested in adult learning and adult education literature can be found in references in their fields. On the other hand, the interests of these professionals in adult learning may be largely as an instrumental means to an end: improving work, health, productivity and so on where learners’ interests do not predominate.
At the risk of appearing to take the high moral ground, there are other differences between traditional adult educators and those who are relatively newcomers to the (problematic) field of adult learning. A major difference is the underpinning drivers of adult learning activities. For many adult educators, adult learning serves the interests of a more just society. This is not to say that it cannot serve multiple interests, but a desire for a different social order remains a common characteristic within our collective psyche. However, newcomers are less connected to the strong traditions from which adult education arose. They are more likely to understand adult learning as functional and concerned about how its ideas that can be appropriated to make their practice ‘work’.

Governments have also appropriated adult education. Prompted by the OECD and its economic development agenda, they have taken up the notion of lifelong learning with enthusiasm. Lifelong learning has gone from an ideal to a policy (with explicit desires for economic outcomes). This could be seen as another example of adult education’s success in colonising other areas.

However, many of these trends reduce interest in adult learning to matters of economics. Individual, social and economic gains are all possible outcomes of adult learning (Schuller 2004). In many of these sites beyond educational institutions, adult learning is largely understood as a means for bringing about some economic gain. While it is possible that individual or social gains may also occur, this does not appear to be the main purpose. This emphasis almost reverses the emphasis of traditional adult educators who have strived for individual and social change, which may (or may not), have economic implications.

**Questioning the role**

So now, questions about ‘the role of the adult educator’ are again surfacing at SCUTREA. If we are truly interested in ideas of inclusivity then perhaps instead, we should be reframing the question by asking not ‘what is our role’ but rather, ‘what can we, as adult educators, be(come)?’ The SCUTREA membership consists largely of people with adult ‘education’ roots: in the ‘second chance’ camp. Perhaps these are the same people whose desire for inclusivity has been instrumental in the dispersal of the field. We acknowledge that learning can be found anywhere, and while this is an inclusive view of adult education, it is also a humbling one: it humbles those who articulate it and prompts our present concerns. This is especially the case for people who make a living being (so-called) expert ‘adult educators’.

Dare we ask, can we even insist on such a role when we have argued so well for inclusivity? We have done a lot of boundary crossing. Crossing boundaries of institutions, of locations, of class, of age and so on, we have permeated many fields of practice. If ‘the (problematic) field is as dispersed as we (and others claim), if practices of adult learning are as pervasive as we claim, if we have ‘released’ adult education from the academy, then how can we insist on a nice neat ‘role’? Do not such conditions (that we are partly responsible for) require equally dispersed practitioners and dispersed practice? That is, the very diversity represented in our programs for ‘adult educators’.

Maybe then, ‘our role’ (as ‘experts’ in the [problematic] field) is to act as counterweights/correctives to myopic views of adult learning that see adult learning as instrumental in serving economic goals for highly skilled productive workforces.
Contemporary ideologies in many OECD countries provide an opening for such work. In Australia (Vinson 2009; Gillard & Wong 2007) and elsewhere (Tett 2006) social inclusion has become the new mantra. For example, in Australia ‘social inclusion’ offers a seductive vision ‘of a socially inclusive society’ where all are ‘valued’ and able to ‘fully participate in society’ because they ‘will have the resources, opportunities and capability to learn, work, engage in the community and have a voice’ (Australian Government 2009). Admittedly the seductive vision of social inclusion serves interests other interests too. It has been described as ‘neo-liberalism with a smiley face’ (Byrne 2005, p. 151), and it is difficult to disagree when closer inspection of its copious documents reveals an emphasis on productivity and participation (in the paid workforce). However, it does provide ‘us’ with an aperture that can be turned against limited discourses of adult learning.

However, if we are to seek to influence the dominant discourse, we need to be careful that we don’t ignore the changed conditions in which we live and simply reiterate old mantras of class critique and social exclusion. A new agenda of inclusion requires a more sophisticated take that values learners for who they are and what they are becoming, not where they may have been or what they can do.

We have to change, not to flee to the academy and disengage with practice, nor to become advocates of particular adult learning practice, but to find new forms of engagement. We need to focus on what we are good for now.

What we as adult educators have in our repertoire goes beyond the well-established roles of advocacy and provision. These include:

- a critical perspective, not in the narrow sense of ideology critique, but multi-faceted ways of engaging with and challenging diverse practices. This includes the deployment of theory of different kinds to illuminate and explore not just adult learning practices themselves but their locatedness.
- a broad perspective that can stand back from multiple and diverse sites of practice to look across practices and broker understandings of learning between those focused on different sites
- a new reflexivity that enables us to be aware of both the possibilities and limitations of our own practices as educators, and to help others see beyond whatever structural constraints they might currently confront.

In short, we can benefit from our own connectedness in rich communities of educational theory and practice in which adults learning are no longer the poor cousins (even if they are poor), nor a neglected species (even if they do not feel well-regarded), nor a bunch of imposters (even if they might feel that way from time to time). While it would exaggerate to say that adult education is mainstream now, it is certainly no longer an anomaly.

**Concluding comments**

Of course, it may be that asking questions about the role of the adult educator is not longer worthwhile! Like the ‘grin without the cat’, adult educators are difficult (if not impossible) to imagine without a specific context of practice. And given that the contexts are dispersed then perhaps we should just call off the search. Insisting on a definitive ‘role’, just as insisting on a definitive field, represents a closure. Meanwhile, there is of course a substantial need for more traditional kinds of adult education
practice to occupy us; it is not as if the problems of the past have now disappeared. The grin and the cat are still present.

References
Vinson, T. 2009, Social Inclusion - The origins, meanings, definition and economic implications of the concept social inclusion/exclusion, Department of Employment, Education and Workplace Relations, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

*This document was added to the Education-line collection on 24 June 2010*