Taking the Pulse of Canadian Adult Education Research

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Introduction

At the 2009 SCUTREA conference, Cheryl Hunt explored the “place and function of autoethnography in education and educational research” (pg. 1) against the backdrop of the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) that documents and places value on the research activities and outputs of British Universities “Powerful gatekeepers, whilst apparently upholding an evidence-base of research that demonstrates ‘quality’, ‘rigour’ and so on, seem to be effectively excluding the ‘self’ of the researcher from the discourses of educational research” (Hunt, 2009, p. 1). While Hunt provided a powerful and moving argument for the centrality of self in engaging in adult education research and in supporting doctoral students as they engage in their own research journeys, the erosion of well-being for adult education researchers, located in British Higher Education, is compelling as this approach is consistently discounted in the RAE reviews. “Sitting in these shadows and losing the will to live as I attempt with colleagues to evaluate research papers and allocate a score from 1* to 4*, I sense that we are once again wondering ‘at the circular motion of the stars’ and forgetting the self that is at the core of educational enterprise” (Hunt, 2009, p. 6).

When we look at this last statement, we discern a deep loss of well-being, attributable to a diminishing sense of meaning and purpose as a scholar, juxtaposed against an academic culture that consistently negates one’s work. For while we (Groen & Kawalilak, 2006) have indicated that our “our sense of meaning and worth needs to come from our sense of vocation and should not be based on traditional external measures of competency” (p. 64), we recognize how deeply challenging it can be to sustain one’s sense of well-being, meaning and purpose, when an all pervasive academic culture tells you that your research doesn’t count all that much.
As Canadian adult education associate professors employed within a Canadian university and steeped in research that places the researcher in the center of our methodologies, we could not help but feel some apprehension after Cheryl Hunt’s presentation. If adult education researchers in the United Kingdom are experiencing the erosion of well-being as a result of not being included in what counts as “good research” within the broader higher education landscape, could we in Canada not be far behind? In order to understand whether “this could happen to us” we believe that, in looking into the future, it is important to understand past and present research trends in Canadian Adult Education. In this paper, we take our pulse by exploring the historical development and current trends of Canadian Adult Education research. Do we also have reason to be worried about the erosion of our well-being as Canadian adult education researchers?

The Early Years: Backing into the Research

Welton (2011), in his exploration of the evolution of Canadian Association for Studies in Adult Education over these past thirty years, reached further back in time to an era when adult education, as a defined field of scholarship within Canadian universities, did not yet exist. “In the 1930s and 40s, adult educators understood themselves as amateurs out to change the world. They saw themselves as an integral part of the movement for social justice flowing like a river through Canadian society” (p. 7). It was not until the late 1940s that the first adult education course was taught by Roby Kidd at the Ontario College of Education. Ned Corbett, a prominent Canadian adult educator who founded the National Farm Radio forum in 1941, “wondered if there was enough material to teach” (Welton, 2011, p. 7). Welton also noted that, in this early venture into academia, the focus was still on adult education practice within the field, particularly learning within social movements. “They did not start with methods; they invented them in the course of confronting the inequities of their society. Coady worried mightily that adult education might end up as a kind of museum piece” (p. 7). By the end of the 1950s, a number of adult education programs were established in several universities across Canada. This, in turn, launched our venture into the area of more formalized academic research.
Early Research Foci and Traditions

As Canadian adult education graduate programs were established during the 1950s, 60s and the 70s, parallel growth in adult education graduate programs was evident in the United States. In seeking to establish credibility as an emerging discipline, within the broader context of social sciences research, we noted that particular types of knowledge and research traditions were of increasing significance over these three decades. These included:

[a] shift from an early emphasis on project descriptions towards more empirical studies and statistical methods … [and the] positivist paradigm predominated because it was seen as a means of producing the knowledge necessary for the field to be classified as a discipline.  
(Kerka, 2005, p. 554)

When exploring the building of a knowledge base in Canadian and American academic adult education from 1945–1970, Grace (2000) argued that, as a newly emerging field, we were trying to professionalise our practice and fit into the larger educational discourse:

During this quarter century both Canadian and US academic adult educators were focused on building enterprise cohesiveness and unity among diverse parts of the field. They worked against field fragmentation and the historical marginalization of the adult education in sociocultural institutions. (p. 143)

Digging deeper into what research questions were most frequently pursued during this time in North America, Rubenson (1982) indicated that practicability and the needs of the field were the most significant, with program planning and administration, instructional materials and methods, and adult learning driving the majority of our knowledge production. Brookfield (1982) also added adult basic education, self-directed learning; participation in adult education, adult education personnel; and continuing professional, management and supervisory education as key areas of adult education research. This was in contrast to research preferences in the United Kingdom that focused on “community adult education and comparative adult education” (Brookfield, 1982, p. 165). Also noted in North American research was “the overwhelming influence of psychology on the research in adult education … it is almost as though all problems concerning the territory could be reduced to psychological ones” (Rubenson, 1982, p. 61). In turn, our heavy reliance on a
psychological lens resulted in reductionist approaches. Reductionism largely ignored the complex interplay of cultural and societal forces and the application and extension of theoretical frameworks from other disciplines beyond adult education.

Shifting our focus to the type of research traditions utilized during the 1950s through to the 1970s, in North America, we found congruence between adult education and education in general. There was an emphasis on inquiries located within a positivist paradigm and in the application of quantitative methodologies. However, the latter part of 1970s also saw the emergence of researchers interested in qualitative and participatory research methodologies. At the end of an era that saw tremendous growth both in adult education graduate level programs and in research productivity, the field of adult education research in North American was beginning to question if “the positivist approaches, used in the natural sciences, were appropriate for the study of social or human issues … and incompatibilities between the positivist paradigm and adult education values were pointed out” (Kerka, 2005, pg. 557).

In teasing Canadian trends out of broader North American trends, St. Clair (2011), in his review of research published within the 22 volumes of the Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education (hereafter CJSAE), highlighted Boshier’s (1982) analysis of Canadian adult education researchers’ contributions to American adult education journal and conference proceedings between 1975 and 1982. This review concluded, “nine of the 11 most prolific authors were from Western Canada and their research … tended to be even more American in nature – meaning highly empirical and pragmatic – than America research rather than reflecting more critical European traditions” (Boshier, 1982, p. 39). St. Clair went on to indicate that Boshier used these results to argue “the need for a journal that represents specifically Canadian viewpoints … [and that] Canadian researchers do seem to have felt the need for a journal that represented the broader culture and history of adult education in Canada” (pp. 40-41).

Regarding the relative uniqueness of Canadian adult education research in the early years, it appears that we had much in common with the broader trends emerging in North American research. However, the establishment of CASAE in the 80’s, an initiative that offered an annual, national research conference and the launch of CJSAE signaled the possibility and potential of creating and developing a distinctive Canadian adult education research presence and tradition.
The 1980s and 1990s: An Emerging Canadian Adult Education Research Identity?

As we trace the threads of Canadian adult education research during the 1980s and 1990s, we recognize that our own shifts during these two decades took place against a backdrop of significant societal changes, general paradigmatic movement in social sciences research and changes within the broader adult education landscape. Turning first to broader societal changes, Plumb (2010) indicated that the late 1970s spelled the demise of the socialist aspirations of the left and the beginning of neo-liberal economic policies, now deeply entrenched, where adult learning and education were taken up as a pathway to unemployment reduction and increased productivity. Second, revisiting social sciences and humanities research in the late 1970s, most critical to the field of adult education research, was a pivotal paradigmatic shift as social science researchers began to question the appropriateness of a positivistic orientation and, in turn, quantitative research methodologies for the study of social and human conditions (Rubenson 2000). Third, narrowing our focus to the adult education research during this time, Rubenson (2000) noted there was still “a strong emphasis on psychologically oriented theories in North America and, in relative terms, a greater preoccupation with social theory in Europe” (para. 17). In turn, with North America’s heavy reliance on an interpretive paradigm with its focus on the individual, Rubenson (2000) inferred that very little research drew from a critical paradigmatic orientation nor did it focus on the goal of informing policy; which was of increasing importance as the broader discourse around lifelong learning education was becoming narrower and more tightly tied to an economic agenda. Garrison (1994), in his analysis of adult education research trends during this time, also expressed concern about our practice-based orientation, calling for more critically oriented research that focused on social and political structures. Against this backdrop, we pick up the threads of Canadian adult education research in the 1980s and 1990s and note convergence and divergence with the broader adult education research trends in North America. Fenwick, Butterwick and Mojab (2001), in their analysis of Canadian adult education research, argued that in the ensuing twenty years after the establishment of CASAE, “Canadian adult education researchers share certain scholarly currents and socio-cultural influences that are
unique and deserve analysis in their own right” (para. 2). Focusing more specifically on the proceedings of CASAE during the 1990s, Canadian adult education researchers engaged in the following areas of study:

Labour and union education issues, social justice concerns, feminism, and studies of literacy were topics that maintained a consistent presence across the decade … Formal, informal and nonformal learning contexts were also consistently present … [there were] fewer studies which examined the role of adult education in community and civic organizations.” (Fenwick, Butterwick & Mojab, 2001, para. 9)

Of particular note is the last statement in the above quote as it infers that the majority of our Canadian adult research had not moved significantly beyond an interpretive focus with the emphasis on the individual. Nor did our research place much emphasis on critiquing societal structures or seeking to inform policy: “most empirical work focused on individuals and there was little evidence of inquiries that employed an institutional or structural analysis” (Fenwick, Butterwick & Mojab, 2001, para. 15).

Both of these observations mirror the more general trends that occurred in North American during the 1980s and 1990s. However, our conceptual and theoretical approaches to research during this time began to provide us with a foundation for a research agenda in the first decade of the 21st century in which we increasingly engage in broader critiques of societal structures and the individualized and professional practice trends of our field (Plumb, 2009). Despite a heavy reliance on learning theories as the conceptual foundation for Canadian adult education research during this time, “critical theory, particularly feminist approaches, was also commonly utilized. Postmodern, often with reference to Foucault’s work, as well as poststructuralist frameworks became more common during the last few years of this decade” (Fenwick, Butterwick & Mojab, 2001, para. 16).

As well, it is important to note that dominant discipline territories informing Canadian adult education research set us apart from the broader North American reliance on psychology as we also drew on sociology and “on rare occasion political economic orientations and notions performativity, borrowed from postmodern literary theory, made an appearance” (Fenwick, Butterwick & Mojab, 2001, para. 16).

Before we venture into the first decade of the 21st century, we highlight one more critical societal trend that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s as this still informs current research trends in adult education. “In the present economic driven agenda,
workplace learning has taken centre stage and is promoted under slogans like learning organizations" (Rubenson, 2000, para. 8). This broader societal interest in workplace learning, within a neo-liberal economic landscape, did translate into an increased research focus on workplace learning in the conference papers presented at CASAE in the 1990s, leading Fenwick, Butterwick, and Mojab (2001) to question whether we “can continue to claim that the field and study of adult education acknowledges the importance of learning that is life-wide and lifelong” (para. 17). However, while Spencer and Cui (2011) acknowledged the strong interest in this area, they indicated a more critical approach to this research strand was taken up, as the majority of articles were “not generally narrowly focused on the state’s interest in creating workers for the new economy” (p. 72). Canadian adult education researchers raised issues and questions outside the training context, drew on critical perspectives and examined marginalized and excluded discourses not included in mainstream instrumental views of work; alluding to our growing interest in research that draws from a critical paradigm.

The First Decade of the 21st Century

As we move into this final phase of our exploration of Canadian adult education research trends, it is within a field that is becoming increasingly frayed at the edges. As St. Clair (2012) indicated, the past fifteen years have been deeply challenging to our field. Adult education departments across the globe have been dissolved or they have merged and/or been absorbed into other specializations. As well, we face “the challenges of a highly audit-driven research system and a professionalization of educational research” (p. 43). And yet, we believe there is room to be cautiously optimistic about Canadian adult education research.

As we position our research focus as Canadian adult educators in the 21st century, we seem to be returning to our adult learning roots in social movements during this first decade. The voices of indignation and social critique that were located at edges of our research in the 1980s and 1990s have featured more prominently in the past fifteen years (Plumb, 2009). Included in Plumb’s overview are research agendas that challenge heteronormative biases in Canadian adult education theory and practice, explore ways that adult education can contribute to deepening capacities for spirituality, examine how globalization is destroying Indigenous cultures and the
environment that sustains all of us, focus on unions as a key space for adult learning, and finally, pull the curtain back on dramatic inequities, poverty and violence due to contemporary capitalism (Plumb, 2011). As well, we ourselves note significant research being done in the areas of citizenship, health, adult literacy, immigration, consumerism and adult learning communities in varied contexts.

One decade into the 21st century, Plumb (2009) has provided a compelling argument for the need for a different and expanding Canadian adult education research agenda as we are situated within a society increasingly built on networked capitalism:

This time, in response to the economic drag of the welfare state, it has acquired capacities for nimble and timely production. This has entailed a massive transformation in the productive apparatus from one focused on highly centralized and standardized industry to one modeled on distributed and ever changing networks. (p. 12)

As result, while we have become adept at critique within our research, it is becoming apparent that change is happening so quickly and across national boundaries and that other approaches needed. In order for Canadian adult education research to not only survive, but to thrive, we need to move easily and nimbly across disciplines and formal structures and to build upon our international adult networks and work collectively to “seriously challenge the underlying source of many our many feelings of indignation” (Plumb, 2009, p.13). Nesbitt (2011) argued that we are well positioned to further move in this direction as “Canadian adult educators are frequent (and vocal) participants in international conferences and have played an active leadership role in international adult education organizations for many years” (p.10). In addition, “a new generation has now taken up the torch—one that considers movements to be looser and less structured groupings of the like-minded” (Nesbitt, 2011, p. 11).

As we move forward as Canadian adult education researchers, we can look at our past with pride. Our heritage, rooted in social movement learning, has been reflected in our research over the past several decades as our over-arching agenda as been to create just, equitable and vital communities at the local, national and international level. This research agenda is certainly still meaningful for Canadian adult educators. What has now shifted is our increasing need to reach beyond our national borders and to collaborate with adult education researchers across the
globe to challenge social, economic and economic inequalities in order to create and sustain viable and engaged communities.

In closing, we return to our question, “Do we also have reason to be worried about the erosion of our well being as Canadian adult education researchers?” In response, we note an overall sense of well-being, meaning and purpose in our field; noting that a full spectrum of research approaches and agendas are counted. And yet, we are increasingly aware that this could just as easily vaporize. Simply put, we acknowledge that our valued colleagues in the United Kingdom, in spite of holding a similar research agenda of working to address inequalities and creating sustainable and viable communities, have been limited in their success.

References


