

## **Connecting Early American Values to the Current Practice of Adult Education**

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### **Abstract**

A historical account is presented of adult education practice by exploring the lives of a few prominent men and women from the 19<sup>th</sup> century often not associated with the formal adult education movement. These include Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Henry David Thoreau. This article seeks to provide a historical context for the adult education movement in the United States, to discuss some dominant values that seem to have guided the movement, and to examine current values that may be evident in contemporary adult education practice.

### **Introduction**

Connecting foundational American works to the adult learning setting can be an effective tool for adult educators. Underlying values such as hope and optimism have guided practice since the beginning of the adult education movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Values are a fundamental part of successful methodologies; however, they are not always apparent in the minds of those utilizing them. A conscious awareness of these values can provide adult educators with perspectives on what guides their practice and the impact that they may have on their learners. While it is apparent that hope and optimism play an integral role in adult education, recognizing the influence of additional values such as courage can deepen an understanding of the field.

In this article, an overview of the adult education movement is presented as a framework from which to extract values such as hope, optimism, and courage. A few brief biographical sketches of prominent historical figures from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century are

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provided to bridge the values of the past to current practice. These figures have contributed, either directly or indirectly, to the field of adult education. For the purpose of this article, adult education is defined as “where adults acquire knowledge beyond random learning” (Ohliger, 2002, p.14). Hope and optimism are perceived as the common values often underlying the premise of individual transformation and social change. The value of courage is most evident when realism permeates idealistic notions.

### **History of the Conscious Adult Education Movement**

A formal movement for adult education began in the 1920s. However, prior to this conscious movement, many Americans in the 1890s had already realized the overwhelming social changes that had occurred. For example, expanded networks of communication and transportation had created national markets; industrialization had created a new work culture; and urbanization had created new patterns of community life (Stubblefield & Keane, 1989). In addition, education became part of the Women’s Rights Movement, which had developed since the 1840s.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century provided platforms for adult education to expand. The early Lyceum and Chautauqua circuits provided a stage for lecturers and community members to engage in thought-provoking discussions on political, social, and cultural issues. The goal of these circuits was to offer enlightenment through education to rural, small-town America. Therefore, the Lyceum and Chautauqua can be thought of as a part of early adult education without the formalities that would come later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Lyceum, itself, had seen the purposes of education change from learning for livelihood to learning for self-improvement, or learning for life (Maxwell, 1998).

With the onset of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a growing concern for the immigrants that settled in the cities. The establishment of settlement houses incorporated values of hope and optimism with the intention of assisting the working class and immigrants through its educational activities. The philanthropic, civic, and social undertakings of these establishments were attempts to socialize democracy (Addams, 1925/1961).

After World War I, adult education was promoted as a new agency through the efforts of the Carnegie Foundation and Fred Keppel. During the 1920s, the main focus of the movement was to determine its direction. Early advocates of adult education held differing views in regards to the degree in which adult education should be associated with social action. After World War II, the interest in adult education increased with three aspects

of activities to promote its expansion. Michael Day, Professor at The University of Wyoming, suggests these activities include adult education for economic development, adult education for social change, and education beyond schooling.

These three aims for adult education are still very visible in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. According to Stubblefield and Keane (1989), history can assist the process of finding new ways of thinking about adult education through the forms it has already taken and the purposes it has served. Through the study of the history of adult education, the values that guided the movement become apparent. They have been an influential part of educational philosophy.

## **Biographies**

### **Henry David Thoreau**

Henry David Thoreau lived from 1817 to 1862. A Harvard graduate, Thoreau had a love for nature from his childhood to adulthood. While at Harvard, Thoreau became influenced by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Transcendentalist philosophy. Thoreau believed that education was not confined to the classroom, and the Concord Academy was proof of his unconventional views regarding methods of teaching. He and his brother, John, started the Concord Academy and based it on the principle of “learning by doing” (Harding, 1982). Perhaps, this was one of the first acknowledgements of experiential learning that is now prevalent in today’s adult education. Unfortunately, the school survived only 3 years.

After his voyage with his brother on the Merrimack River and then his brother’s death, Thoreau sought solitude. Although not seeking a change in location, Thoreau sought a change in his way of life. In 1845, Thoreau set out to the shores of Walden Pond where he built himself a small cabin to pursue his intent of living life deliberately. The time spent at Walden allowed Thoreau to observe nature as well as the ongoing events of society from an objective view. The values from the life of Henry David Thoreau can provide adult educators with a means of evaluating teaching methodologies and the values they offer.

### **John Dewey**

Dewey lived during two world wars and the industrial movement and urbanization. All these events contributed to the purposes of the agencies

that were in existence at the time. These events also contributed to Dewey's philosophy for education. Dewey was a philosopher, psychologist, and educator who believed that learning is based on experience. Dewey (1938/1997) viewed learning as an ongoing process, where the ends were ever evolving into new learning.

At the University of Chicago, Dewey and his wife, Alice, developed the laboratory school based on his belief that learning is acquired through discovery. While in Chicago, Dewey also worked with Jane Addams at Hull House. Dewey has contributed to education with his ideas of democracy and individual growth. According to Dewey (1938/1997), the aim of education should enable individuals to grow throughout their entire lives. Dewey suggested that individuals should form active habits of learning. These habits need to involve thought, invention, and initiative. The formation of these habits cultivates the concept of growth.

### **Elizabeth Cady Stanton**

Although overshadowed by Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton was a driving force behind the Women's Suffrage Movement in the 1800s. During the quest for equality, Stanton taught women to be more than only mothers and wives. She raised five children while pursuing emancipation for American women from patriarchal control. Amidst all the opportunities presented before her she also lived in oppression. At a time where women were thought to not need an education, Stanton modeled her life after what would later be considered existential beliefs. Her pursuit of individuality and independence can be seen through the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, the Lyceum circuit, her publications of *The Women's Bible* and *The Solitude of Self*, and many other associations that she was affiliated with throughout her life (Griffith, 1984).

*The Solitude of Self* presented the philosophical core of her thoughts about women's emancipation, and it was the characteristic of self-sovereignty that epitomized her value of courage. There is much that can be learned from her message, which was "the infinite diversity in human character and necessity of equal rights for all individuals" (Stanton, 1892, cited in Dubois, 1992, p. 187).

### **Hope and Optimism**

Dewey (1916/1944) contributed to the adult education movement with his thoughts regarding the relationship between democracy and education,

embracing the idea that adults need to have the freedom to develop and grow throughout their lives. The notion of democracy is only one component of a methodology rooted in values. For John Dewey (1938/1997), the values of hope and optimism lead to the belief that education could help develop individual growth and social intelligence.

According to Dewey (1916/1944), a democratic society has not only a shared common interest, but it also allows free interaction with other groups. The type of education within a democratic society should emphasize learning activities based on the interests of the learner and allow the learner to exercise control in regard to social relationships within the educational arena. For Dewey, a democratic society refuses to acknowledge the principle of external authority.

Many years later, the democratic ideal continues to be represented in Knowles' ideas. "In a truly democratic organization there is a spirit of mutual trust, an openness of communications, a general attitude of helpfulness and cooperation, and a willingness to accept responsibility, in contrast to paternalism, regimentation, restriction of information, suspicion, and enforced dependency on authority" (Knowles, 1980, p. 67).

### **Dewey's Hope and Optimism in Current Practice**

While obtaining pragmatic skills, those who seek an education for a change in life are hopeful and optimistic that their goals will come to fruition. "Those who think about adult education for lifelong learning are, by nature, planners of the future, not surveyors of the past. In their view, education tends to be concerned with needs and aspirations; with imperfections or inadequacies in people, institutions, and communities; and with how life can be made better by learning" (Houle, 1992, p. 35). Often, adults enroll in learning programs with the pragmatic goal of transformation as a tangible end. They seek to obtain a degree, certificate, or other end product to seal their transformation. Hope, (or in other words, expectation) has been what adult educators have offered as a packaged product (Ohliger, 2000) .

### **Courage**

It can be argued that Henry Thoreau and Elizabeth Stanton, both of whom are not conventionally associated with the broad field of adult education, added the value of courage to adult education practice. The events that occurred in Thoreau and Stanton's lives continuously required

critical thought. As Thoreau and Stanton wrestled with issues they faced in their lives, they lead others to begin to think critically and examine issues of their time.

### **Thoreau's Courage in Current Practice**

Thoreau's descriptive narrative of life at Walden is an excellent illustration of courage. *Walden* (1854/1997) continues to serve as a valuable lesson for adult education. Thoreau's experiment to challenge himself and live deliberately directed his learning toward critical thought. Thoreau's observations of nature led him to recognize the need for reflection and the need for questioning assumptions.

Thoreau's example could encourage educators today to look deeply into their teaching methods and the values that are received by the learners. This requires adults to be active participants in the assessment of their knowledge. In much adult education practice, learning is constructed as a process where knowledge is created through reflection of experiences. Brookfield (1991) suggests that one of the central beliefs of critical thinking is to remain skeptical of any claims to total certainty.

An aim of adult education today is often to help people to critically analyze their own biases and perceptions. Adult learners are asked to reflect on course content through a wide-angled lens by stepping outside their own conditioned perspectives. These reflection exercises used in current practice can cause a shift in the thinking of adult learners. When one's thinking is altered, it is not easy to relate to the people and situations in one's life in the same way as before the change. Therefore, it is evident that learners who are in the midst of questioning their presupposed thinking may experience a transformation process that may not have entirely positive outcomes.

### **Stanton's Courage in Current Practice**

"We see...but when we consider the self-dependence of every human soul, we see the need of courage, judgment, and the exercise of every faculty of mind and body, strengthened and developed by use" (Stanton, 1892, cited in DuBois, p. 253). Hope, optimism, and courage are displayed in Stanton's life at various phases. She essentially moved from the tangible end of bettering society with equality for women to the self-sovereignty, which patterned her life. Stanton defined, developed, and achieved a model of independent behavior that led her through the transformation continuum: tangible end to reflection to action. What does this mean for education?

The value of courage emphasizes self-development and is influenced by existentialist philosophy. It encompasses pressing beyond the established norms of society and searching the mind for answers to individuals' own questions. Learners today can benefit from educators who help them to manage the change process and guide them to move beyond hope and reflection towards ongoing action. As a result, adult educators fostering a courageous spirit in order to develop the learner as a proactive self-directed learner could provide enlightened human existence (Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982). Seeking continued cognitive and psychological development, adult educators challenge students to question the values in their own lives. According to John Ohliger (2000), it is the ability to move others to think that can be linked to the value of courage and goals for adult education.

### **Conclusion**

Dewey, Thoreau, and Stanton share a common thread in their view of learning: the individual's existence and interaction within society. Dewey's work provides an example of how one's learning can be shared and extend to others the hope of societal change. Thoreau believed in living deliberately and taking time out of life to reflect. He called attention to simplification of an individual's existence, which allows for new insight on the part of the individual. He questioned if one's illustration of a different way of living could shape societal thinking. Stanton's drive towards equal rights for women exemplifies the value of sustainable courage in action that it takes to move beyond the ideals of hope and optimism.

Hope and optimism have been cemented as underlying values in the field of adult education. Educators consistently encourage learners to seek individual growth with the assumption that it will lead to a better society. While this may occur, it may be more realistic to focus on preparing learners to have the courage to move through inevitable changes that come with individual growth that may be either positive or negative.

Through a look back at these values illustrated by prominent figures of the adult education movement, educators may question the goals and methodologies in use when working with adult learners. Are we as educators seeking to be cheerleaders, or are we guides that can better prepare adult learners to extend beyond thinking about transformation as a tangible end? If we encourage our learners to look merely at hope and optimism, we look towards transformation. If we guide them towards courage, we may help them to move through transformation toward what

may be on the other side.

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