

## **Preserving the Voices of Adult Educators**

Len A. Bogner & Brett P. King

### **Abstract**

The Adult Education Interview Series (AEIS) started at the University of Central Oklahoma (UCO) and was inspired by the use of TED talks and other similar videos in online and distance education courses. It is a collaboration between the Adult Education and Safety Science Department and the Center for eLearning and Connected Environments at UCO. The intent of the AEIS is twofold: to preserve the history and stories of adult educators and to analyze the interviews to determine common or contradictory themes that provide insight into perspectives of professionals in the field. By understanding the perspectives of the field, we can better ascertain where the field was, is and where it might be going. The AEIS is to be an open resource that can be accessed by any member of AHEA for their Adult Education courses.

### **Preserving the Voices of Adult Educators**

“Writing Our Way: Giving Voice to Adult Learning” was the theme of the 41st annual AHEA conference at the University of Central Florida in Orlando, FL. The Adult Education Interview Series (AEIS) is an example of recording, rather than writing, the voices of adult learning. The Adult Education and Safety Science (AEISS) Department and the Center for eLearning and Connected Environments (CeCE) at the University of Central Oklahoma (UCO) have combined to create an Adult Education Interview Series (AEIS).

The AEIS at UCO was inspired by the use of TED talks ([www.ted.com](http://www.ted.com)) and other similar videos in online and distance education courses. It was noticed that there are not many videos available on the topic of adult education, and thus the project was formed. The idea of AEIS is to record the current thoughts of adult educators throughout the nation and the world and to archive them so they can be used by adult educators in adult education courses now and in the future.

Adult education is a broad field of study. The problem addressed by AEIS is that college students are not familiar with the history, breadth, and relevancy of adult education. There is also a lack of autobiographical information about educators in the field. This is in part due to the vastness of the discipline and a lack of a cohesive story. In the AEIS, adult educators are asked a series of questions about their origin story with adult education, why the field is important, what makes it unique, and the future direction of the discipline. These are perspectives that are not easily found in textbooks.

### ***Purpose of the Project***

The purpose of AEIS is to capture the knowledge and experiences of prominent educators who are, and who have been, a part of the adult education field. It also seeks to enhance teaching and learning by providing video content, which helps learners contextualize the field of adult education. The AEIS is to be an open resource that can be accessed by any member of AHEA for their adult education courses. The project/research began at the Research to Practice (R2P) Conference in Norman, OK in 2015 and continues today.

### ***Relevant Literature***

Dr. Gretchen Bersch produces a similar project to the AEIS entitled *Conversations on Lifelong Learning: A Series of Conversations*. She solicited interviews with leaders in the field of adult and continuing education. They shared thoughts about their career, philosophies and theories, previous work, and the future. The purpose of her project is to create video interviews with scholars in the field. Dr. Bersch has interviewed more than 50 scholars. She never published any research about the interviews. The entire collection of interviews is available to check out at many public universities as well as sold online through Gretchen's website (Bersch, 2015).

Keith Armstrong (2007) wrote and edited a biographical book entitled *North American Adult Educators* about adult educators. It contains 50 autobiographies of well-known adult educators largely from the United States and Canada. The autobiographies mostly focus on how the educators got started in the field. The book provides an excellent source for historical purposes and adds context for researchers in the field.

Gretchen Bersch, along with Susan Imel, published a book entitled *No Small Lives: Handbook of North American Early Women Adult Educators*, which focused on the biographical information for women in the field of education in the middle of the 20th century. This book contains the stories of 26 North American women working in the field of adult education between 1925 and 1950. This work is important not only for historical purposes, but the contributions of women in the field had been largely left out prior to this book (Imel & Bersch, 2015).

### ***Methodology***

The methodology for the AEIS is fairly simple. In the interviews, the interviewers ask the interviewees a series of questions. There is a prepared list with 11 potential questions

that the interviewer reviews with the interviewee before the recording starts. The interviewee selects the questions they would like to be asked and highlights any additional topics they may want to talk about. Before the recording starts, interviewees are asked to sign a release form. The interviewees are allowed to review the video and make any changes before it is posted to the website.

### ***Participants***

The sample of participants was determined by a few different factors. Since interviews were conducted at conferences, the sample size was limited to those in attendance. Also, the interviewees were perceived as influential in the field of adult education. Additionally, the sample was affected by the interviewees' schedules and willingness to participate. Included in this study are 22 interviews within the adult education community. They consist of professors, researchers, administrators, and emeriti. They were from various locations throughout the United States and Europe.

### ***Research***

The intent of this study is to contribute to the existing body of knowledge regarding professors in adult education. The focus of this study is to bring to light the knowledge and experience of adult educators, in an effort to provide clarity within the field. This study has two implications within the field of adult education. First, by collecting and archiving the interviews, the history of the field is preserved; it is a free resource for anyone to use within the classroom or to view on their own time. Second, analyzing the interviews to determine common or contradictory themes will provide insight into perspectives of professionals in the field. By understanding the perspectives of the field, we can better ascertain where the field was, is, and where it might be going.

### ***Recommended Books for Adult Educators***

The first dive into the recorded data was to examine what books were most mentioned in the interviews as either making an impact or being recommended. The answers to the questions "What books would you recommend?" and "What contributions have made the most impact in the field of adult education?" were examined for qualitative themes. The findings from this data mining were presented at the 41st annual AHEA conference in 2017.

Answers to "What books would you recommend?" were very straightforward; however, authors and books were also mentioned in the "What contributions have made the most impact in the field of adult education?" question. Please keep in mind that not all

interviewees were given both questions but rather, depending on the pre-interview discussion, may have been asked only one of the two questions.

The books are roughly divided into three categories: the classics, the contemporaries, and the personal favorites. Even some of the interviewees suggested these categories. The classics will be defined as books written before the early 1980s that have only one edition but may have been reprinted. The contemporaries will be defined as books after published after the early 1980s that have been updated and have several versions or editions. The personal favorites are those books that may not directly relate to adult education or are little known in the field. In an interesting side note, most of the classics were mentioned by the Hall of Fame generation of adult educators. The contemporaries were referenced by those in early- to mid-career.

Let us start with the classics. The most mentioned book in this category was *The Modern Practice of Adult Education* (1970) written by Malcolm Knowles. I do not think this should come as any surprise and should be a staple on your bookshelf. The next most mentioned book was *The Adult's Learning Project* (1971) by Allen Tough. This book was mentioned as both a wonderful read as well as an important contribution to the field. Next was *The Meaning of Adult Education* (1926) by Eduard Lindeman, noted by several as the classic that started the American adult education movement.

Also noted as a classic book is *The Inquiring Mind* (1963) by Cy Houle, which was noted as a game changer in the field, making adult education more of a discipline rather than a theory. *Literature of Adult Education* (1992) by Houle was also noted as the first attempt to bring all the writings on adult education together in one publication. Other cited books written by Malcolm Knowles included *Self-Directed Learning* (1975), noted as a quick and practical read, and *The Adult Learner* (1990), specifically Edition 4 because that was the last edition that Malcolm Knowles was noted as the sole author.

In the contemporaries' category, *Learning in Adulthood* (2007) by Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner was far and away the most mentioned text in this category. In fact, two interviewees called it "the bible" of adult education. *Mastering the Teaching of Adults* (1991) by Jerry Apps and *Exploring Spirituality and Culture* (2003) by Elizabeth Tisdell were both mentioned multiple times. After these books, there was no other clear consensus, but there were some authors who were mentioned several times, including Steven Brookfield and Raymond Wlodkowski.

Several of Steven Brookfield's books were mentioned including *The Skillful Teacher* (1990) twice and *The Power of Critical Theory* (2005) and *Engaging Imagination* (2014) each once. The same was true for Raymond Wlodkowski with *Enhancing Adult*

*Motivation to Learn* (1985) three times, and *Diversity and Motivation* (1995) being mentioned once.

Other contemporary books that were noted included: *Self-Direction in Adult Learning* (1991) by Hiemstra and Brockett, *Individualizing Instruction* (1990) by Hiemstra and Sisco, *Handbook for Transformative Learning* (2012) by Taylor and Cranton, *Adult Learning Research and Practice* (1983) by Huey Long, *Early Innovators in Adult Education* by Huey Long, *Philosophical Foundations of Adult Education* (1991) by Elias and Merriam, and *Adult Education and Adult Needs* (1956) by Havighurst and Orr.

Finally, we come to the personal recommendations. There were no books that were mentioned multiple times, but the themes that did develop in this category were by discipline. The discipline of the interviewee determined their personal suggestion. The largest discipline mentioned was “social justice.”

Specific books mentioned in the personal category included *Education for Social Change* by Myles Horton, *Teaching to Transgress* (1994) by bell hooks, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968) by Paulo Freire, *Case Studies for the New Professor* (2014) by Thomas D. Cox, *Walden* (1854) by H. D. Thoreau, *Narrative Learning in Adulthood* (2008) by Clark and Rossiter, *How we Learn* (1999) by Knud Illeris, *Leading in Black and White* by Livers and Caver, *Volunteers for Learning* (1965) by John Stone, *Aging Well* (2002) by George Vaillant, *Power Dynamics in Teaching and Learning Practices* (2006) by Johnson-Bailey and Cervero, and *Narrative Learning in Adulthood* (2008) by Carolyn Clark and Marsha Rossiter.

There were also some general mentions of authors, journals, and websites that we believe are important to mention. They include *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* (journal), *AHEA Book Series* (publishing your conference presentation), articles by Edward W. Taylor on transformative learning, books by Leona English, writings from Phyllis Cunningham on culture and race, writings from Juanita Johnson-Bailey, Jerome Bruner’s research in adult education, Peter Lang’s series 37 on Dusan Savicevic, and [trace.tennessee.edu](http://trace.tennessee.edu).

One more category to add for general understanding is contributions to the field. Although specific books were not always mentioned for this question, there were some interesting comments that came from this discussion. Many interviewees mentioned the work of Jack Mezirow and Patricia Cranton on transformative learning. In fact, transformative learning was the most mentioned contribution to the field. Other contributions mentioned included experiential learning, neuroscience and learning,

residential learning, self-directed learning, andragogy, the Adult Performance Level (APL) study, and Benjamin Franklin and the informed citizen.

As a quick recap, the following are the books that were mentioned multiple times in the interviews, ones that should be on your bookshelf:

- *The Meaning of Adult Education* by Eduard Lindeman
- *Modern Practice in Adult Education* by Malcolm Knowles
- *Self-Directed Learning* by Malcolm Knowles
- *The Adult's Learning Project* by Allen Tough
- *The Inquiring Mind* by Cy Houle
- *Learning in Adulthood* by Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner
- *Exploring Spirituality & Culture in Adult & Higher Education* by Elizabeth Tisdell
- *Enhancing Adult Motivation to Learn* by Raymond Wlodkowski
- *The Skillful Teacher* by Steven Brookfield
- *Mastering the Teaching of Adults* by Jerry Apps

### ***A Call to Action***

As adult educators, we understand the important part that experience plays in our journey through lifelong learning. The authors would like you to consider sharing your thoughts, ideas, and experiences with AEIS, or just take the time to record your beliefs and wisdom. We understand that all learning is transformational. Please consider sharing your stories of transformation with the next generation.

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**Dr. Len Bogner** is a tenured professor in the Adult Education and Safety Sciences Department at the University of Central Oklahoma. He serves as the program coordinator for the Reach Higher/B.S. Organizational Leadership program, which is UCO's online degree completion program.

**Brett King** received his B.A. in Museum Studies and is currently pursuing a M.Ed. in Adult Education from the University of Central Oklahoma (UCO). He currently serves as an Instructional Designer for the Center for eLearning and Connected Environments at UCO. He has experience in student engagement issues and online assessment tools.