

## Trends and Direction of Adult Education

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I will analyze the shifts of adult education historically through the lens of power and policies, technology, the nature of the field, and the structural constraints in the context of higher education. The findings show that in general, in the field of adult education, there has been a change from social justice, anti-poverty to efficiency and job-oriented adult education; from more social and politically-driven in the past decades to more job-related and economically-driven in recent years, from serving the marginalized people to serving the elites. Technology, nature of the field of adult education, and structural setting of the higher education constrained the development of adult education.

*Keywords:* Trends and direction, policy and politics, technology, history

Adult education is unique. It is deeply embedded in the life experience of adults and the local and global social contexts. It plays an important role in enriching the lives of adults and changing their knowledge, skills, lifestyles, and their living conditions. Lately, however, adult education has been marginalized. It is depicted as supplementary education, one which is not marketable, not competitive, and not scientifically defined. These negative perceptions of adult education have resulted in funding cuts, elimination and merger of programs, and marginalization of adult educators in policy decision-making (Cunningham, 1995; Hill, 2010; Quigley, 1993). This trend is not only occurring in America but in other countries as well.

The field of adult education has been trying to survive by incorporating more valued trends in the larger field of education, such as more “scientific” research, an emphasis on marketable efforts such as vocational and professional training and human resources development, and calling for more structured professionalization of the field (Bierema, 2010; Knox & Fleming, 2010). Replacing adult education with other concepts, such as lifelong learning also represents similar endeavors.

The changes occurring globally have an impact on adult education. Adult education does need to adapt to the changing landscape of the social and political environment. However, adult education also needs to maintain its uniqueness as a distinct field. The purpose of this study is to investigate how adult education is shaped historically and the future direction of adult education.

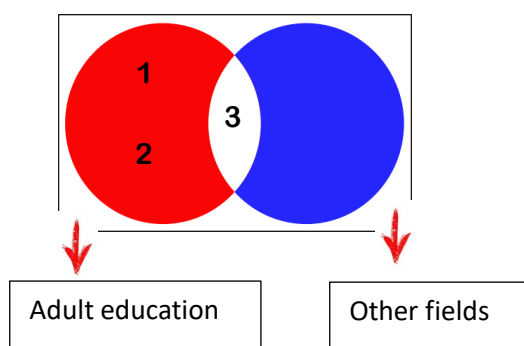
### Literature Review

Adult education includes three main categories: (a) Basic level adult education, such as General Education Development (GED)/Adult Basic Education (ABE), English as a Second Language (ESL)/English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), Developmental Education/College Readiness programs (Coffey & Smith, 2011); (b)

undergraduate/graduate level adult education; and (c) training/human resource development programs and community-based adult education programs (Douglass & Moss, 1969).

In category one and category two, adult education plays a primary role for the development of individual adults. It includes scholars' teaching and researching on adult education, and administrators and organizers' application of adult education principles in adult education practice. Category three is the application of adult education in other fields. It is the intersection between adult education and other fields. It requires a general background in other fields and the principles and methodology in adult education (Douglass & Moss, 1969). In this category, adult education plays a secondary role to serve the primary goals of the individuals, communities, and organizations.

**Figure 1.** *Categories of Adult Education*



The topics that relate to different historical periods of adult education have been studied by some scholars. For example, Brunner, Wilder, Kirchner, and Newberry (1959) investigated non-vocational adult education research since the mid-1920s. Long and Agyekum (1974) studied adult education from 1964-1973. Rose (1991) examined 25 years of the adult education act from 1966 to 1991. Stubblefield (1988) wrote a book entitled *Towards a History of Adult Education in America: The Search for a Unifying Principle*. The roles of adult education and future trends were also discussed by the educators in the field (Rose, 2008; Schroeder, 1970). In the future, adult education research should find a point to balance its role of solving social problems and practical issues. These perspectives from different historical periods show the changing roles and different focuses of adult education in a specific historical context.

Unlike other scholars whose main focus targets on the history of adult education, this study will use the historical documents as background and the perspectives from the scholars, practitioners and policy makers as references to show the trends and direction of the field.

### **Methodology**

In this study, ideas from documents will serve as the background information, and perspectives from 21 participants will serve as the primary data for this project. The documents collected include these such as Adult Education Task Force (1960s), Education for Public Responsibility (1960s), some important adult education organizations such as the Adult Education Association

of the USA. (AEA-USA), CPAE (Commission of Professors of Adult Education), UNESCO; Lifelong education in the 1960s; The Annual report on adult education since the 1950s; the lists of the papers presented at the AERC conferences; and the topics relevant to adult education in a variety of adult education publications, such as the Yearbook of Adult and Continuing Education, Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education, Handbook of Adult Education, the major journals of adult education, the important adult education organizations, etc.

The documents I collected provided me with the contextual information about the historical development of adult education. This collection of the materials also left some questions that have not been answered. Therefore, I interviewed 21 participants who were either involved in policy work, or have worked in the field of adult education as leaders, or they have played a significant role in the field and are familiar with the history of adult education, or who know the in-depth knowledge of one aspect of the field

## **Findings**

The field of adult education has shifted during the last several decades and has been shaped by various factors (see Change 2020).

### **Adult Education Moves from the Primary Role to the Secondary Role**

Adult education changed its direction to market-driven and job-oriented approach. Its sizes are decreasing, and it must collaborate with other fields to survive. However, in the third category, where adult education plays a secondary role, adult education is active, and its size is increasing. Other fields in category three are taking the leadership role and replace adult educators, which caused the adult education program to decline.

### **Adult Education Is More Economic and Utilitarian Driven**

The ideology of the government drove adult education. Usually, when republicans were in power, adult education was expected to have job and business oriented positive results. When the Democratic Party was in power, community and social issues were favored. In the early decades, adult education focused on social consciousness and social justice. It emphasized social function. It was more social and political oriented. Since the 1980s, influenced by new liberalism, adult education is reviewed as individual investments by both parties. Politicians and interest groups are more interested in short-term benefits. Adult education is becoming more job-oriented, and market and commercial-driven.

### **Adult Education Moves from the Margin to the Center in Practice**

Lack of financial support also causes a weak job market and lack of full-time jobs in adult education, which constrains the development of adult education since it provides few incentives for students after they graduate. Universities become more realistic and favor programs that can bring money and grants. Adult education is moving more towards the higher end sector of adult education to survive. It moves from serving the marginalized people to serving the elites.

Unlike adult education in category one and category two, in practice, adult education in category three is very active and has moved from the edge/margin to the center. Profit universities and organizations can also enroll adult learners, which introduces competition in other fields. However, other fields do not identify themselves as adult education since they have their own professional associations and their own identities. They are taking the leadership role and replacing the roles of the adult educators.

### **Technology Is Changing Structure and Physical Scope of Adult Education**

Technology impacts the direction of adult education and makes the physical scope of adult education decreased. Due to the technology change, learners move from learning through face to face courses to learning from free online courses. Adult education gradually loses its dollar benefit, its physical base, and its market to other fields. For example, YouTube makes free knowledge sharing among peers easy. Everyone can be an adult educator. Adult education lost a large portion of its market in this area.

### **Diversity and Practice Nature of Adult Education and the Structural Setting of the Higher Education Constrain the Development of Adult Education**

The adult education researchers mainly arise from the practice side, and the nature of adult education is more practice oriented. Since adult education is diverse and each program is small, there is a lack of a consistent research agenda. Major research universities have cut off the adult education programs because the research agenda and research base in the field of adult education are not concentrated (Cunningham, 1995; Hill, 2010; Quigley, 1993).

In the higher education context, promotion and tenure policies emphasize faculty members' teaching and publications, and extensive work in the community context is not adequately credited, which constrains professors' work and does not recognize the nature of adult education being deeply integrated into the context of community. Within the university structure, outreach is supported, but not substantial to the point that it would influence a faculty's tenure and promotion. Faculty members' work is limited to the structure. They focus on their small world and are not interested in connecting to the policymakers, nor do they actively reach out to the community for support. After the faculty in adult education retires, the adult education program changes its direction for survival.

### **Conclusions**

In general, in the field of adult education, there has been a change from social justice, anti-poverty to efficiency and job oriented adult education; from more social and political driven in the past decades to more job related and economic driven in recent years (Cervero & Wilson, 2001), from serving the marginalized people to serving the elites. Bosworth (2008), for example, stated that the low-income working adults are not well supported by the Federal grants and loans since such grants and loans are not designed well for low-income working adults' education. Technology, nature of the field of adult education, and structural setting of the higher education constrained the development of adult education.

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