

20th Anniversary Volume

***Adult Education and the Changing
International Scene: Theoretical
Perspectives***

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In the past fifty years, adult education has been forced to change in a wide variety of ways, driven especially by the growth of the knowledge economy. These changes have been reflected in the way the field's name has been changed in some parts of the world; although in others, such as the U.S., the name change has not been so apparent. The change in name often reflected the change in aim and national policy. In the United Kingdom, for instance, adult education initially incorporated continuing professional development and eventually became adult and continuing education, with recurrent education hovering on the periphery. Then both adult education and continuing education, which in fact was lifelong education under a different name, became subsumed in lifelong learning. Lifelong education was the term adopted by the United Nations and lifelong learning by the European Union. Fundamentally, this shift in name reflected the changing significance of the education of adults, and by the time it had become lifelong learning, it was primarily vocational in its orientation. But from the outset, the European Union's use of the term did not actually mean lifelong learning since it never incorporated school education nor higher education and it never considered adults beyond retirement age in educational terms. In 2006, however, the European Union acknowledged the reality of the situation and reverted to the concept of adult learning and, for the first time, included senior citizens in its considerations (European Commission [EC], 2006).

However, all of these changes were driven by one major force—the demands of the knowledge economy in the global society. Thus, if we

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are to understand the issues underlying international adult education in the past half century it is important that we first understand how globalization operates. At the same time, social change is not only the result of one set of forces. Indeed, many others also operate, and one to which we will make reference in this paper is demography. In the West, for example, we live in an aging society, but this is not true in many other parts of the world.

The first part of this paper, therefore, examines globalization and highlights some of the forces that operate on adult education in different countries of the world. These forces exercised standardizing tendencies in different countries, but there were forces resisting these changes, or ones which endeavoured to change adult education in different directions. Thus, in the second part we will highlight how some of these forces are affecting adult education. In the final part we will draw a simple model of these pressures on adult education. In this section it will become apparent that while there are considerable similar demands on adult education, there are profound cultural differences that make adult education internationally a very diverse phenomenon.

Part 1: Globalization

Many theories of globalization exist; Sklair (1991, pp. 27-36), for instance, classified the theories of globalization into five categories:

- imperialist and neo-imperialist;
- modernization and neo-evolutionalist;
- neo-Marxist (including dependency theories);
- world system (and the new international division of labor theory); and
- modes of production theory.

In a way all of these recognize the centrality of the economic institution of society although it is only the imperialist and Marxist models that focus on the power of those who control that institution. In themselves all of the theories throw some light on globalization but none explain it fully and only by combining and modifying them can globalization and the creation of the knowledge economy be explained.

The economic institution no longer alone constitutes the substructure of society as it did in Marx's day, but there is still a substructure which now includes the economy and technology, especially informa-

tion technology, which has enabled the re-alignment of space and time. These form the major elements of the global substructure. However, this substructure has been supported by the military and political might of America since it is not only the most powerful military nation but also extremely wedded to the capitalist economy. Consequently, the concept of globalization might best be understood as a socio-economic and political phenomenon having profound cultural implications.

From an over-simplistic perspective, globalization can be understood by thinking of the world as having a substructure and a superstructure, whereas the simple Marxist model of society was one in which each society had its own substructure and a superstructure. For Marx, the substructure was the economic institution and the superstructure everything else in social and cultural life, including the state, culture, and so on. Those who owned the capital, and therefore the means of production, were able to exercise power throughout the whole of their society. But over the years, the significance of ownership declined as more mechanisms to control un-owned capital have emerged. The control of information technology has assumed greater significance and even more recently capital has also incorporated intellectual endeavors, over which the center also seeks control (Prichard, Hull, Chumer, & Willmott, 2000; Jarvis, 2005). But, significantly, this substructure is not the substructure of a single society anymore—it is now the common substructure of very many countries in the world.

It is important to note here that economic competition—the market—is at the heart of the global substructure. It is this competition that is a major factor in creating a fast moving world, i.e. transnational corporations and those many innovatory small- and medium-sized companies must produce and sell their products in order to survive. In such a situation, a consumer society is inevitable. Consequently, we can see how the world has individualized and has become fluid as people and societies respond to the rapid demands of the substructure and to the artificial needs (demands/wants) created by the market. Nevertheless, a variety of peoples and societies are resisting this process by endeavoring, to differing extents, to retain their uniqueness and independence which has given rise to the phenomenon of glocalisation (Robertson, 1995). The global-local relationship is one of tension, even resistance, since those who control the substructure seek to dominate the national and local cultures whereas some societies and cultures endeavour to retain their uniqueness. The global superstructure is now more like a lattice work in which the various parts are fluid and changing as some lose their

distinctiveness within the sea of change, whilst others fight to retain their difference. Hence the local cultures are “liquid” in many ways but there is a stable substructure which, in its own way, is a major cause of the liquidity of contemporary society. However, it has to be noted that there are some countries in the world—notably in the Middle East—to which this argument would not apply directly since they have resisted the structural changes that would locate global capitalism at the core. In these societies, religion and traditional culture are still dominant.

Globalization can thus be depicted in Figures 1 and 2:

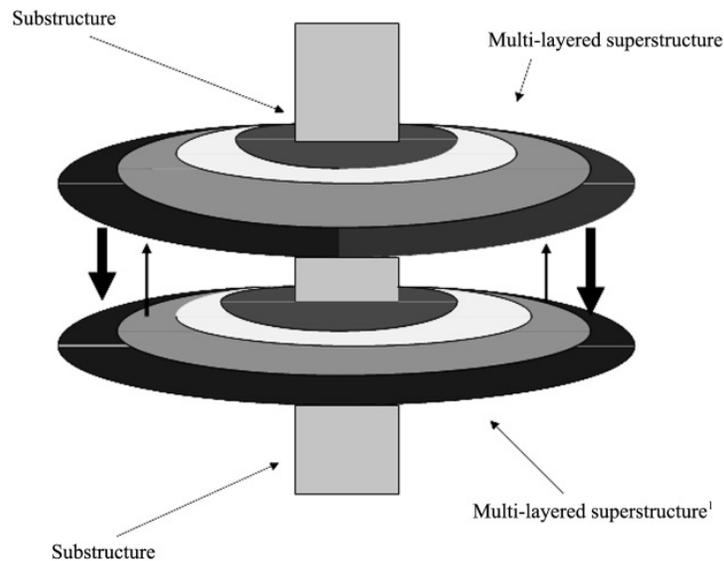


Figure 1. A Global Model of Societies

The significance of this model is that there is a global substructure represented here by the core running through all the different countries and, in this sense, it is a force for standardization between the different countries of the world. Those who control it exercise global power and that rests with large transnational corporations. At this time in history

¹Multi-layered governance is a concept first utilized by Held et al (1999, pp. 62-77) although I have adopted it in a more simple manner.

the U.S. is part of the global substructure (Americanization) and power—political as well as socio-economic—resides in the global substructure. Nevertheless, it can also be exercised between countries through political, trade, aid, and other inter-national mechanisms.

The large downward pointing arrows illustrate that there is a relationship of power between the countries of the world while the two, small, upward-pointing arrows depict resistance to the forces of globalization. However, it would be true to say that there are blocks of countries at different levels of the global power structure, with the G20 countries being the most powerful stratum. In Figure 1 each layer represents a country which is penetrated through the centre by the substructure, and each country can now be represented in the following manner (Figure 2):

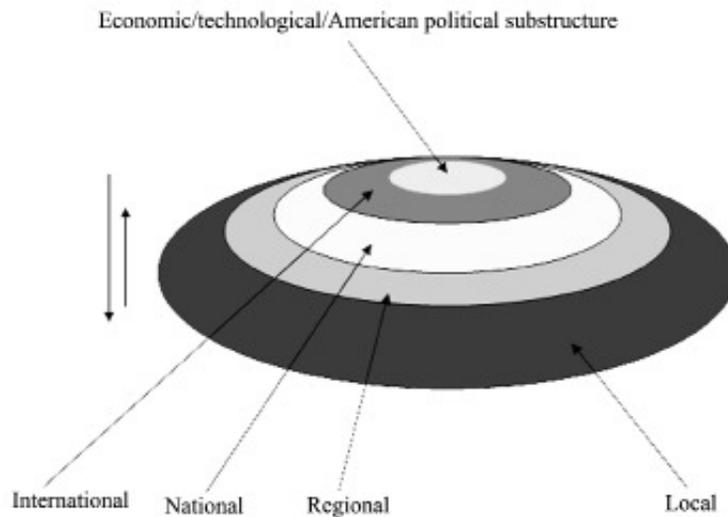


Figure 2. A Multi-Layers Model of Society

The layers of each society are depicted hierarchically in order to illustrate that it is not merely a geographical matter but that it is also one of power stemming from the core to the periphery. It has to be recognised, however, that power should not be a one-way process since, by the nature of democracy the “lower orders” can and should be pro-active as well. Naturally, individuals can exercise more power in an organizational context in any one of the layers of society. This is neither a determinist position nor is it a simple one of social class, as society has

changed considerably since the time when Marx wrote, and power is much more diffuse.

In a sense, then, the forces emanating from the core are the driving forces of each society and adult education is one of the phenomena most affected by these forces since knowledge lies at the heart of this global economy. Nevertheless, within international, national, and local cultures there are wider interests and concerns than those to be found in the core and so there is a degree of resistance to the global forces and these are to be found at every level.

Each country relates to others and although this diagram has depicted only two countries, the external arrows represent the unequal relationships between each one. For instance, the dominant downwardly pointing arrow represents trade, aid, consultations, and so on. The development of information technology, rapid travel, and so on means that people throughout the world are much more aware of what occurs elsewhere and are much more able to affect it and even resist it. It is possible, therefore, for people at different levels in the hierarchy to communicate across national boundaries electronically and to travel rapidly and cheaply between different countries, so that there is inter-cultural sharing. There is certainly more giving by the more powerful to the less powerful countries, so that the arrows depict a hegemonic relationship in which the dominant cultures of the West still export their culture and commodities but through different mechanisms.

Part 2: The Forces of Change and Adult Education

Adult education is at the heart of the global economy since knowledge, knowledge workers and knowledgeable workers are all required and, because of the capitalist competition in the core, the level of knowledge changes exceptionally rapidly. These workers are, therefore, forced to continue their education and so adult education itself is changing rapidly as the knowledge economy makes new demands for new products to sell/consume. Thus, we will now look at it from the perspective of each of these five levels in society

Core: At the core of each country is the global knowledge economy: corporations have to produce marketable commodities which require a relatively educated work-force that will enable workers to respond to rapidly changing conditions and produce new commodities or to introduce new and more efficient ways of making established products. The professions led the way in these changes by introducing continu-

ing professional development, but this did not precede corporations' involvement in the 1980s long before we saw the development of *The Corporate Classroom* (Eurich, 1984). Thereafter, a multitude of similar studies emerged examining innovations or even textbooks about how to innovate in the education and training of the workforce. Learning in the workplace is one of the outcomes of these changes; another includes the focus on the learning organization. This phenomenon has occurred throughout the capitalist world and adult education has increasingly assumed a vocational orientation with more liberal forms of adult education being discontinued.

In the U.S. it has been quite common for adults to return to university to undertake further study. But over the past thirty years, universities in the remainder of the industrial world were forced to change. They introduced short courses and gradually part-time higher degrees so that there were as many adults registered for courses as there were full-time undergraduate students (Campbell, 1984). It is only in the non-industrial countries that universities do not have a high proportion of post-graduate qualifications and fewer adults return to university to gain further qualifications.

Adult learning has reflected these dominant forces. Most universities offer higher degree courses and an increasing number of doctorates, especially practitioner doctorates related to the world of work. Since this form of adult learning is focused on the world of work, knowledge is legitimated by performativity (Lyotard, 1984) and broken up into smaller chunks or modules, reflecting the needs of the workplace and the demands of the market. In addition, the form of delivery of teaching and learning materials has changed so that face-to-face instruction is only one mode of learning and distance education has assumed a more prominent place, making it possible for workers to learn from anywhere in the world.

International: No society in the world is free of the pressures exercised on them by international organizations. A few of the most significant such organizations would include the United Nations (UN); the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO); the World Bank; the International Monetary Fund (IMF); the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD); governmental agencies working as international pressure groups; and churches and other religious organizations. Three types of social pressure emanate from international agencies—those that would oppose, modify, or reinforce global pressures. Those organizations which reinforce global pressures most

strongly include the World Bank and the IMF, and the education/training sponsored by them is predominantly orientated to the knowledge economy. Significantly, those countries least able to fend for themselves are most exposed to those international agencies which attempt to create new social structures, thereby inducing so-called “efficiency.” Most education for adults in these countries is offered to prepare them for the workplace. Other organizations, such as the OECD, are not quite so orientated but as the OECD is an organization of the wealthy countries its main concerns remain economic. By contrast, the European Union (EU), which has a dominant concern with the workforce as well, is also concerned with citizenship, social inclusion and, to a lesser extent, personal development. Its policies, therefore, produce a broader perspective on adult learning, including international research and instruction. In addition, since 2006 (EC, 2006), the EU has also fostered adult learning beyond the workplace by being concerned with older citizens. UNESCO’s concerns include culture and indigenous knowledge and so it also supports a broader range of concerns in its adult education provision, including literacy, throughout the world. Naturally there are countries and cultures which oppose many, but not all, of these pressures.

National: National governments are in the tricky position of being in the middle. They all need the knowledge economy and all the benefits that global capitalism can bring and so they support or sponsor adult education courses that are work-orientated. Nevertheless, they are aware of the different needs of their cultures and peoples and so they support a much broader range of adult education courses. Additionally, national governments have their own ideological orientation and they also seek to introduce their own policies about adult learning.

If we look at a few examples we can see that the United Kingdom’s *The Learning Age* (Department for Education and Employment [DFEE], 1998) was quite orientated to the economic needs of the nation and proposed such innovations as the University for Industry and Learn Direct, a national information service. This report certainly reflected the neo-liberal principles of the New Labour government and with it its desire to introduce lifelong learning, although in the first instance it made little reference to those other specified aims of lifelong learning. There is, however, one reference in the Minister’s Foreword that says “learning offers excitement and the opportunity for discovery. It stimulates enquiring minds and nourishes our souls” (DFEE, 1998, p.10). However, a decade later *The Learning Revolution* (Department of Innovation, Universities, and Skills [DIUS], 2009) was totally orientated to non-formal

adult education as the government tacitly acknowledged that it had been too work-orientated. Regardless, it still did not drop its neo-liberal approach to adult education.

In contrast to the emphasis of the UK government, similar documents produced at the same time from two other industrialized societies—one inside the EC and the other in Southeast Asia—reveal different emphases. The Finnish government's policy document had its own vision:

By the year 2004 Finland will be one of the leading knowledge and interaction societies. Success will be based on citizens' equal opportunities to study and develop their own knowledge and extensively utilize information resources and educational opportunities. A high-quality, ethically and economically sustainable mode of operation in network-based teaching and research will have been established. (Ministry of Education, 1999, p.29)

As the Finnish vision is based on citizen opportunities, so Hong Kong's vision is based on all-round student development. The aims of education in the 21st century are three-fold: enabling students to enjoy learning, enhancing student's effectiveness in communication, and developing in students a sense of creativity and commitment (Hong Kong Education Commission, 2000, p. 30). These aims are to be achieved through the following principles: student focus, "no-losers," quality, life-wide learning, and society-wide mobilisation (Hong Kong Education Commission, 2000, pp. 36-42). While the UK vision has been driven much more by neo-liberal economic policies from both the global sub-structure and the political ideology of New Labour, more humanistic approaches are evident from both Finland and Hong Kong. These also reflect the prevailing culture of the different countries.

Additionally, other countries such as Thailand (Sungsri, 2009), emphasize indigenous knowledge to a much greater extent and here there are centres for adult learning even though economic concerns still prevail. For instance, in Thailand the government supports informal adult education which is still practiced locally in these centers of wisdom and the local wisdom is taught freely usually by the older generation.

Hence, we can see the wide variety of policies and practices in adult education that emanate from governments. Furthermore, each country—as we know from the recent UNESCO World Council on Adult Education in Brazil—produces its own statements of policies and practices, and we can see how these relate to the adult educational demands of the global knowledge economy. At the same time there has been an educational reaction to the pressures placed on people to purchase the commodities

being produced and sold by the organizations that comprise the global core in each country and we have seen universities and NGOs running consumer education courses. The education of adults has always endeavoured to respond to the needs of adults even if it, at times, operates in opposition to the dominant forces in society!

Another dominant force on adult education at the level is demographics is that the U.S. and Western Europe are aging societies and so national movements, which have also internationalised, have emerged for education of adults such as Elderhostel and the University of the Third Age. Third age education is one of the most rapidly growing areas of adult education and one least affected by the global knowledge economy since third agers are, almost by definition, retired. At the same time their desire to learn may well have been influenced by the fact that during their working life they had acquired the desire to continue to learn. But there is also another way in which demographics is affecting the vocational education of adults in different parts of the world. Since many older people have become international tourists and they, like other tourists, appreciate guides, tourist education has developed widely with the UN supporting a network of tourist education centres (Vigunda, 2009).

At the national level there are a few NGOs that organize adult education, including the Worker's Education Association (WEA) and the Women's Institute in the UK. Despite its name, the WEA now organizes adult liberal education since its vocational orientation has been overtaken by the demands of the knowledge economy.

Regional and Local: At the local level, it is more possible to examine practices that occur within education, at all levels, and to see the extent to which the private-public partnership has emerged. The following are but examples. Increasingly, locally-based state education is being influenced by business and industry. This occurs not only in the way that the curriculum is devised and implemented, but also in the sponsorship of school activities and even the sponsoring of whole schools. Businessmen are frequently appointed to governorships and advisory boards and schools arrange business placements and so on for their students. The extent to which this occurs throughout the world is an interesting and important research question.

At an organizational level, the emphasis, naturally, is on the job, the learning organisation, and human resource development (Pedlar, Burgoyne, & Boydell, 1997), so that workplace learning is growing in significance throughout the world. Having said this, a number of employing

organizations do release staff for other forms of education. In the same way, the development of learning regions/cities/towns is another example of the way that public and private are brought together in anticipation of enriching the community. Learning community policies and networks exist throughout the world (Longworth, 2006) with the interaction of formal and non-formal learning, and many of these are sponsored or supported by local and regional governments.

At the local level many organizations, such as churches and other voluntary organizations offer a wide variety of education for adults and the amount and type offered depends to a great extent on local demands and needs. For instance, in a very small town in the UK which is running a Lifelong Learning Fair at the time of this writing, over 40 organisations and private companies are offering an educational program for adults. At this level there is greater freedom to organize a wider variety of adult education. Some of these local courses might be regarded as adult education resisting globalization since social pressure does not all operate in one direction only. People and regions fighting to preserve the uniqueness of their own cultures and religion, for instance, are often viewed as conservative forces resisting “progress.” Islam and other non-Christian faiths, such as the Hindu religion countries such as Nepal (Laksamba, 2005), also operate in a similar manner. But resistance to globalisation is being seen more widely, not only through open demonstrations but also in such things as environmental education (O’Sullivan, 1999), consumer education, wider political and academic debate, and life style. This is the place for radical adult education.

Part 3: Towards a Model for International Adult Education

It is possible, therefore, to detect three types of pressure operating on educational practice as a result of globalisation: the globalizing forces, those forces which seek through policies and practices to modify or expand the approach to education, and those which seek to resist globalization which are currently embodied in social movements and non-governmental organizations. Consequently we can construct a model of the way that these forces operate on adult education (or on any part of it) in any country (see Figure 3).

The globalising forces are standardizing pressures, since the global substructure has the same needs throughout the world for an educated workforce and a market that can purchase the commodities that it

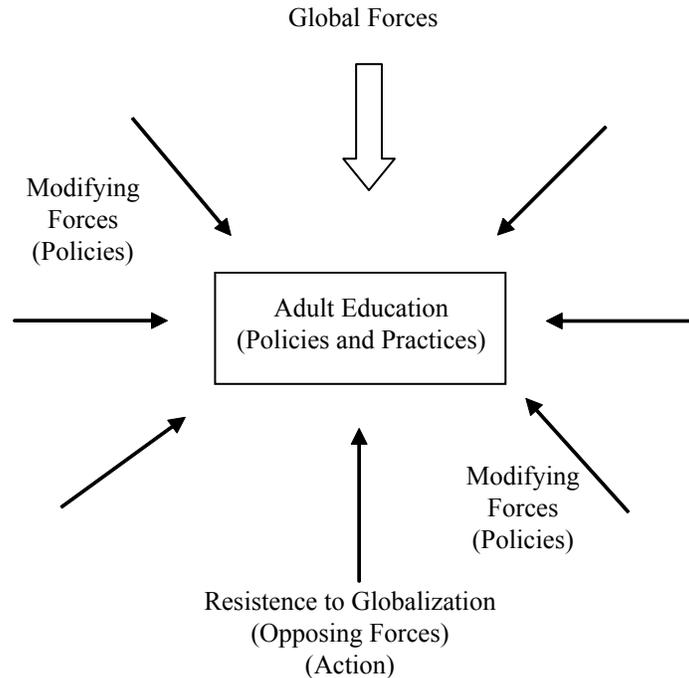


Figure 3. Adult Education in Social Context in a Globalizing World

produces. Consequently, adult education policies and practices should develop considerable similarities, not only in terminology but also in curriculum structure and delivery. In contrast, the forces for resistance emphasise the need for cultural, ecological, and environmental education. They also raise issues of morality and place emphasis on the person as end and not as a means to other ends. In the middle are the modifying forces of governance. Some will be more supportive of the globalizing process and others will tend to enact policies that resist it, as the arrows demonstrate. Each country is a recipient of all three types of force and so adult education policy is framed and implemented at the intersection of these forces in a globalising world.

Utilizing such a model in different countries, allows for a comparison of policies or practices in adult education in any country in the world.

Conclusion

Adult education, which is part of the periphery of each country, is to a considerable extent shaped by the powerful forces emanating from the global core which constitutes the centre. But forces for change are also generated in the other layers of each society as policies are introduced that seek to modify or reinforce the global pressures and these also have their effects throughout the society. But the pressures do not all operate in the same direction and so it is also necessary to understand the educational resistors to change. The policies, structures and practices of education are all the outcome of these powerful forces for change and this model provides a useful theoretical framework for adult education in a globalizing world.

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