

Featured Articles

Reality and Research in Adult Education: Do Opposites Really Attract?

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Introduction

The title of this presentation is intended to be inflammatory—hyperbole for the sake of effect. What I'd really like to accomplish in this article is to point out some of the ways in which research in adult, continuing, and community education has diverged from promising and productive paths. This article picks up where Henry Johnson (Johnson, 1995) left off. Johnson ended his keynote address at the 1994 Pennsylvania Adult and Continuing Education Research Conference with a quote from William James. James said, nearly a hundred years ago in regards to educational research, that we need to “broaden it and thicken it up” (James as cited in Johnson, 1995, p. 9). This article picks up where Johnson left off in several ways: 1) His talk was primarily historical; here we will focus on the present and the future. 2) He put adult education research in the perspective of educational research in general; here we will focus more specifically on research in adult education. 3) Johnson analyzed adult education research from an intellectual, even erudite, perspective; here we will examine it from a practical perspective: How does it affect what we know and do as adult educators?

The basic premise of this article is that academics, professors of adult education, are in many ways responsible for the present state of affairs regarding research in adult education, and it is up to the academics to help

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us get back on track. As a result, this article may sound as though it is intended for professors of adult education, and, in fact, at one level, the message is for the professorate. However, I believe that professors of adult education have a special responsibility when it comes to the conduct and uses of research in the field. The responsibility for leadership in research has and will continue to come from those who have the most training in the field and those who have the most at stake in the continuing development of research and theory in the field: the professoriate. The message by extension, however, affects all of us—academics, practitioners, and policy makers—not because we need to reach consensus on what to research and how to research it (something I hope will never happen in my lifetime) but because we all stand to benefit or lose by the quality and relevance of the research being conducted.

Background

Formal research in adult education can be divided roughly into two general 30-year time periods. First is the period from 1935 to 1964. During this period adult education became established as a field of study in the university. The beginning of this time period, 1935, is marked by the first doctorates from graduate programs in adult education from The Ohio State University and Columbia University. The end of this time period is marked by the publication of the “Black Book” in 1964, a declaration of arrival for adult education in academe. This period marks the growth of the field, the growth of formal research in the field, and an increasing integration into the academic world—a move seen as imperative for status, development, and improvement by early leaders in adult education. Indeed, the formal title of the “Black Book” sums it up: *Adult Education: Outlines of an Emerging Field of University Study* (Jensen, Liveright, and Hallenbeck, 1964).

The second period is from 1964 to the present. This time period could easily be divided into several more distinct periods, but I don’t want to get bogged down in a history lesson. This period can be characterized generally, however, as a time of increasing integration of adult education into the university setting and, ironically, as a time in which we have begun to realize that the dream of academic status and security for adult education in the university is not all that we thought it would be. It hasn’t helped us address the significant issues in the field, it hasn’t helped us develop a more relevant research agenda, and we haven’t reached the state of enlightenment promised by academe. In fact, in some very important ways

the development of adult education as a university field of study has sidetracked us from more productive approaches to the conduct and use of research.

The Problem

So that leads us to a very important question. Does research in adult education meet the needs of the field? It is my contention that our current research does not meet the needs of the field. It does not meet the needs of practitioners who desire research that has a direct relevance to their areas of practice. It does not help us develop theory and explanations which guide useful inquiry in the future. It does not help us understand the complex social and individual issues in which we are engaged on an everyday basis. Why? I believe there are two general reasons. First, our status in the university system limits our ability to think and act: the university dilemma. Second, there are a number of other developments in our field which have had the effect of limiting the development of relevant research.

The University Dilemma

In regard to the first reason, one of the basic dilemmas we are facing in adult education research today is the pull between the academic environment and the needs of the field to develop more varied research approaches. The pull is between the desire for academic respectability on the one hand and the needs of the field on the other. Because academics are so embedded in the university system—our jobs, our status, our very being has become tied to our roles as faculty—it is very difficult for many of us to adopt, let alone teach, new perspectives on research such as critical theory, participatory action research, and feminist approaches.

Cervero (1991) points out four different relationships between theory and practice in adult education. The first is that, historically, adult education as a field of practice “is carried out without reference to an organized body of professional knowledge and theory” (p. 21). In essence, this idea underscores the fact that adult education was practiced long before it was studied. The second relationship identified by Cervero is that knowledge generated through scientific research should be applied to improve practice in adult education. This notion is based on the scientific paradigm described by Guba and Lincoln (1981) and others in which informed and improved practice results from the application of scientifically proved principles. In many respects this is the foundation for the “Black Book”

and is the “default” point of view of many academics and university-based researchers. The third view described by Cervero (1991) is “that the best way to improve practice is to uncover and critique the informal theory that practitioners use in their work” (p. 21). This notion of the relationship between theory and practice in adult education is illustrated by the action research movement described by Quigley (1995). The fourth point of view is the most recent and redefines the relationship between practice and theory in adult education. This point of view holds that there is “a fundamental unity between theory and practice” (Cervero, 1991, p. 21) and, further, “that theory and practice are indivisible because they are part of a single reality” (p. 29). The underlying issue of this perspective is that knowledge is power and that power always serves the interests of some group of people. The conclusion of many who hold these ideas is that research, therefore, needs to be conducted in practice and the knowledge and power generated by research should serve the needs of improving society and the conditions of those with less power. These four relationships between theory and practice represent a broad spectrum of ideas regarding how research should be conducted, who should conduct it, and what purposes it should serve. The fundamental question that can be asked of academics is this: Are all these approaches addressed when trying to understand the role of research in the development of theory and practice in adult education? Where are these four relationships reflected in our research curriculums?

The desire for academic respectability has led to the following conditions in adult education research: First, we’ve adopted the scientific or positivistic paradigm as the predominant approach to conducting and using research. This is the second of the four relationships between theory and practice described by Cervero above. Second, we’ve limited the methods of research to those most palatable and understandable by promotion and tenure review boards. Third, we’ve replicated these trends through the teaching of research to graduate students and through theses and dissertations in an effort to prove that we really do belong to the academic club. Fourth, we’ve given up control of the teaching of research by allowing it to be taught by other departments such as agriculture, psychology, or the K-12 education people—an artifact (or price) of membership in the academic club.

One result of these trends is that alternative approaches to research end up being taught separately—that is, we require students to take their “traditional” research courses from other departments but then come back to adult education to get the “real scoop.” The problem with this solution

is that the alternative approaches will always end up sounding reactionary, secondary, separate, but not quite equal. As has been shown over and over again in the social sciences, there is no such thing as “separate but equal.”

Another manifestation of the university dilemma and a contributing factor to the decline in the relevancy of research is the way in which research is taught in graduate programs. Many, if not most, graduate students see research as an anathema—something to be endured, a rite of passage, but not an integral part of their studies. They often do not see it as a useful tool for practice or professional development. This reaction is almost certainly due to the ways in which research is taught. There are several reasons why the way in which research is taught in graduate school has a negative affect on students’ understanding of and appreciation for research in adult education. First, research is taught largely by those outside of adult education who are not interested in understanding our field and are sure in their belief that the tools of the research trade as they know them apply to adult, continuing, and community education with the same validity and usefulness as to K-12 education, psychology, or agriculture. Second, many courses in research are taught from the scientific or positivistic paradigm and do not incorporate alternative approaches such as naturalistic research, feminist theory, or critical theory. Third, many courses are taught without regard to the changing nature of the relationship between theory and practice in adult education as outlined by Cervero (1991). Finally, many courses are taught in ways that are different from, even in opposition to, the often more humane and student-centered approaches adopted by adult educators (more than one of our students has said “its nice to be home” when coming back to an adult and community education course after taking the research course here at IUP).

Other Factors Limiting the Usefulness of Research in Adult Education

There are several other developments in adult education which limit the ability of research to help us understand the complex social and individual issues which we face. First, the prevalence of the humanistic paradigm for understanding social and personal issues has hampered our ability to think creatively about people, the world, and adult education’s role in intervening in the ordinary business of life. While adoption of the humanistic paradigm has helped lead us from sole reliance on the scientific or positivistic paradigm to a more flexible approach involving both the scientific and naturalistic paradigms, it has kept us from developing even

newer approaches. With a theoretical basis in humanism we are still stuck in the second of Cervero's four ways of understanding the relationships between theory and practice: that practice should flow from theory.

Second, the fragmentation of research in the field of adult education is yet another trend that has effectively thrown a road block into its development. I suppose it had to happen sooner or later, but now you can't just be an adult educator—you have to specialize in literacy, basic education, HRD, or continuing professional education, etc. This trend has led to 1) more specific research which is framed in questions and approaches which are less generalizable and 2) more general research which is perceived as generic, remote, and less applicable to particular areas of adult education. In either case, the research being conducted has increasing limitations for practice as well as theory development.

A third area of concern is that there is a lack of development in the field of relevant research on topics of real importance. There are actually two concerns here. First, topics of research are not being expanded to address the evolving nature of concerns which affect the practice of adult education. Second, we are not reaching new levels of understanding in the topics which are being researched. Long (1991) points out that six areas of research have been consistently popular since the 1950s: adult learning, program planning and administration, program areas, adult education as a field of study, institutional sponsors, and materials and methods. He also points out that the research appears to be non-cumulative—that is, despite continuing research in the same topics year after year, we do not seem to have any deeper understanding of these six areas, and our perspectives on them have not deepened.

A last area of concern is linked directly to and is a product of our reliance on the scientific paradigm. This is the problem of looking at knowledge as nontransmutable, that is, not subject to change over time, in different contexts, or from different perspectives. This approach is captured in a quote from Huey Long (1991):

The roots of the above problems are found in the historical and philosophical nature of adult education as a field. The field continues to be characterized by its undisciplined nomenclature and its phenomenological, subjective orientations and preference. Such a condition hampers adult educators' efforts to agree on terms and content and ultimately defeats the development of knowledge. (p. 88)

Long's words are, of course, an expression of the scientific paradigm. But they are also a cry for help: He is expressing a desire to return to the good old days—a manifestation of our need for security. We seek absolutes in an ever changing world. We want principles and guidelines we can hang our hats on and call home, even while we reject the gurus and hallowed truths of just a few years ago. One of the strengths of adult education is its diversity of opinion. A basic point of the message in this article is that we are dangerously close to agreeing – even more than many people realize—because of the shared assumptions about research created by buying into the value system of the academic community.

Is it true that we are still under the sway of the scientific paradigm even while we spout radicalism and insight to riot with a call for action? My experience says, “Yes.” Most research courses taught in adult education graduate programs, most expectations for theses and dissertations, most expectations for publishing, and most requirements for tenure and promotion still involve meeting criteria which were developed years ago by an academic community bent on establishing itself first and addressing the needs of practitioners second.

Working Toward Solutions

If adult education is about intervention into the ordinary business of life (Courtney, 1989), then research in adult education should help us better understand the dynamics of intervening and the consequences of doing so. If this is the case, then, in order for research to be useful in adult education, we must 1) broaden the issues we are investigating; 2) develop and discuss multiple perspectives on these issues; 3) increase our depth of understanding on the issues through an open discussion based on multiple perspectives; 4) find better ways to involve and inform all adult educators in the conduct and ownership of research; and 5) contribute to, but not limit, new ways of thinking about the issues with which we are faced.

First, we must change the way we think about our roles as academics and researchers. The days of the lone scholar bravely facing the trials of ignorance and injustice are past. The importance and the scope of the issues which can be addressed by the lone researcher just don't measure up in this complex, ever-changing world. We must develop team approaches to research. Teams should be developed across universities, across disciplines, among students, and among academics, practitioners, and policy-makers. The teams should not be based on the old-boys and gals networks so common in adult education. They should be formed in

public, and there should be open invitations to participate. When people are invited, they should be sought out for their knowledge of and commitment to the issues, not for their connections or status in their field.

Second, we must change the ways in which we teach research. We must change the way we teach research to graduate students (and ourselves) as well as create new ways in which all adult educators can become involved in research—not just as consumers or people to be enlightened, but as real partners in a quest for real solutions to real problems. Is what we are doing currently to prepare researchers in adult education sufficient? Is it even necessary?

Third, we should stop teaching the history of research and start exploring the future of it. We don't need to know more about antiquated and irrelevant research methods like Analysis of Variance and the Mann-Whitney U test which can do little to help us understand the complex issues of today. We should start looking at emerging issues and trends—even trying to anticipate them. Merriam (1991) talks about three research paradigms—positivistic, inquiry or naturalistic, and critical—as a loose collection of traditional and emerging paradigms. Where are these reflected in our research curriculums? Where are the four relationships between theory and practice described by Cervero (1991) reflected in the research curriculum?

Fourth, instead of delegating the teaching of research to other departments, we should be teaching it ourselves. The curriculum should be revised to reflect a guided inquiry approach to learning rather than a passive, soak-up the good stuff from experts approach. For example, we could revise graduate programs so that students learned in three phases: 1) study about and learn alternative approaches to learning, knowledge, research, and the pursuit of truth; 2) study our current collections of research and literature for what it's worth; and 3) develop and investigate issues to create new knowledge and understanding in the field. It might even be argued we could do without the second phase.

Fifth, we must remember that the real knowledge in adult education does not exist in textbooks, dissertations, theories, or even in research conferences. Knowledge in adult education is in the doing of it, in the practice of the field. We must develop the collaborations and partnerships which draw academics and practitioners together to address the significant issues of our day. Allan Quigley's experiments with action research is a step in the right direction. So is David Deshler's use of participatory action research with his students at Cornell.

Sixth, we must change the ways in which we interact with one an-

other at conferences. Conference attendance and presentations can no longer be used just to generate another line on a vita. This “show and tell” approach to sharing research has long outlived its usefulness. Conferences such as the Adult Education Research Conference, the Commission of Professors of Adult Education, and the Pennsylvania Adult and Continuing Education Research Conference must be used for additional purposes: 1) to identify issues and problems that need the attention of competent and committed researchers; 2) to identify novel approaches to addressing these issues; 3) to create teams of people interested in and committed to addressing the issues; and 4) to create, enhance, and maintain a sense of commitment to relevance, persistence, and teamwork in our research. By commitment I am not talking just about individual commitment to a career or personal renewal (both highly important), but commitment as members of a field, a discipline, to enhancing our ability to understand the issues so that we can better intervene in the ordinary business of life.

Research is an endeavor that belongs to all adult educators. The time has long passed to subscribe to the traditional notion that research and, thus, the knowledge produced through research belong to the academic community. Under this notion academics are made responsible for “sharing their research” with practitioners who must prove themselves worthy of the knowledge by taking courses offered by academics so that they can understand what has been researched about their own practice. This is the old “theory-to-practice” argument: Who has the greater responsibility in making research usable—academics or practitioners? Under this line of reasoning academics are responsible for making research understandable and usable by practitioners while practitioners are responsible for learning research jargon so that they can be intelligent consumers of research. The primary result of this approach is job security for academics and a sense of resentment by practitioners. Our field, our ability to help others and improve the world, and our ability to build a community of adult educators have been the unwitting victims of these traditional notions about research.

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