

Feature Article

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## *Reflections on the Lindeman Legacy*

**John Rachal**

There are multiple ironies surrounding what is in all probability the most famous American book on the subject of adult education. It was written prior to the existence of an academic degree in adult education; it is a mere 143 pages long; it was never even published in hardback; it appeared in the very same year (1926) that the American “field” of adult education was organized; its title promises a definition that is never specifically delivered; and it was authored by a man who saw himself primarily as a social worker and “social philosopher,” but who came to be known as the “father of adult education.” Yet today Eduard Lindeman’s *The Meaning of Adult Education* is likely to be found at the top of any American doctoral adult education reading list, and Malcolm S. Knowles—Lindeman’s most celebrated intellectual heir—once observed at a conference that he read Lindeman’s classic about every year. Further evidence of Lindeman’s continuing influence is suggested by the fact that finding a first edition of *The Meaning of Adult Education* in a used bookstore is likely to be an adult education bibliophile’s fondest ambition.

Why has this slim little volume, now approaching ninety years old, endured, while the multitudes of adult education books in its wake have, with a handful of exceptions, drifted into relative obscurity within a few

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years of their publication and taken their places in the library basement of unread tomes? I believe that there are a number of reasons, each deserving of some comment.

The first is that while the book, which Lindeman actually called an “essay,” is a product of its time, it also seems to transcend its time. It is no accident, then, that Elena Marescotti, in her new and the first Italian translation of Lindeman, titled her commentary essay “The Meaning of Adult Education by Eduard C. Lindeman: A Multi-faceted Classic,” immediately catching the cultural value, that tends to be universal, of Lindeman’s writing. *The Meaning* appeared just eight years after the Great War, and the democracy theme suffused the ethos of that era. John Dewey, ten years earlier, had published his famous *Democracy and Education*; and the outcome of the War against the Kaiser seemed to justify the superiority of democracy as a form of government over any alternative government led by a “Caesar.” Lindeman had read and cited *The Way Out* (1919), a manifesto for the inclusion of adult education as a central tool in Britain’s recovery plan after the War. The American adult education literature of the decade after Lindeman’s book is positively filled with references to democracy—far more so than now—frequently in the context of adult education being a necessity for democracy to be meaningful, since an informed citizenry in a democracy is a necessity to serve as a bulwark against authoritarian impulses. Thus, adult education was far more than a vocational or recreational undertaking. Rather, it was an essential ingredient in the preservation and renewal of an idealized, though flawed, system of government. The undereducated could too easily be swayed by demagogues, but a society that valued adult education was less likely to succumb to the hate-mongering and fear-mongering that were, and always have been, demagogues’ stock-in-trade. Democratic themes permeate Lindeman’s book. He three times cites his favorite poet, the nineteenth century American troubadour of democracy, Walt Whitman, author of *Leaves of Grass* but also the prose work *Democratic Vistas*. In his chapter on power, Lindeman echoes his colleague, Mary Follett, in her distinction between “power over” and “power with,” which is the very heartbeat of meaningful democracy. Warning against authoritarianism a year after *The Meaning*, Lindeman in 1927 seemed almost nonchalant concerning the “republic of soviets” since America was a “bourgeois nation,” thus presumably inoculated against those dangers. But fascism alarmed him: “. . . what is taking place on the Italian peninsula should interest us as Americans because it may some day happen here. . . . it constitutes the first realistic challenge to the spirit of freedom

and democracy which emerged from our revolution in 1776” (Lindeman, as cited in Gessner, 1956, p. 239). There were many flaws in the mosaic of American democracy, idealistic as it was, which could have led him to such a warning: laws passed during the War constricting freedom, the rise of corporate power, shameful worker exploitation, socio-economic barriers and divisions, child labor, grave poverty, the often appalling treatment of blacks in the South, fear of foreigners, the fact that women had only seven years earlier been granted the right to vote. But as with Whitman, democracy for Lindeman was still the best hope, and adult education could be a critical strategy for its realization.

Contemporary American adult educators seem less steeped in these democracy themes, perhaps because the word has lost some of its luster and become the catchword for politically conservative flag-waving, along with its cousin “patriotism.” Nevertheless, modern and post-modern adult educators revere egalitarianism in its sense of equality of opportunity, and many excoriate the social stratifications and injustices which collectively comprise what for them is the *bête noire* of adult education. Follett’s and Lindeman’s ideal of “power with” rather than “power over” is part of the catechism of modern and post-modern adult education, and issues of race, gender, and sexual orientation permeate the current literature. In their embrace of the themes of power and social justice (a term Lindeman himself used), numerous modern adult educators are descendants of the man known as “the father of adult education.”

A second and related reason for the continuing appeal of Lindeman is that his adult education philosophy aligns quite well with the philosophical orientation of many current adult educators. Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) identified five philosophical orientations for adult education, each with its own purpose: (a) Social Transformation, which seeks to use adult education to transform a fundamentally unjust society; (b) Cultivation of the Intellect, which seeks the advancement of a broad, liberal education and the development of critical thinking; (c) Organizational Effectiveness, which utilizes adult education to train and develop organizational members to promote the effectiveness of the organization; (d) Self-Actualization, which seeks to assist individuals to reach their full potential in any or all dimensions of their lives; and (e) Personal and Social Improvement, which seeks both the betterment of the individual and the simultaneous and intertwined betterment of society. Personal and Social Improvement is especially popular among American adult educators largely because it strikes a balance between two polar positions, the individual and the social. Moreover, the “improvement” of

individual and society is interdependent and interactive: improving individuals' lives collectively improves society, and improving the society improves the lives of individuals. Lindeman recognized both roles for adult education and sought to interweave them: "Adult education will become an agency of progress if its short-time goal of self-improvement can be made compatible with a long-time, experimental but resolute policy of changing the social order. Changing individuals in continuous adjustment to changing social functions—this is the bilateral though unified purpose of adult education" (1926, p. 105). Of the two, he leans to the social, the collective, while recognizing the interaction and interdependence of each. Almost two decades later he would lean even more toward the collective in his view that "Every social action group should at the same time be an adult education group, and I go even so far as to believe that all successful adult education groups sooner or later become social action groups" (Lindeman, 1945, p. 12). As a sociologist, Lindeman's emphasis on the societal and cultural roles of adult education seems natural enough; while this particular statement, appearing at the end of the most destructive war of all time, surely reflects his concerns for both the present and the future of humanity at large. Few modern adult educators would dissent from his argument that social action is educative, and many would applaud the other half of his equation, namely that the core of adult education is to confront social problems and injustice. In short, philosophically he is our contemporary.

There is a third reason that Lindeman is our contemporary, and that is his approach to instructional method. Many of his methodological ideas for adult education reach their full fruition in Malcolm S. Knowles, who knew and revered Lindeman. Of the five philosophies, Knowles was mostly in the camp of Self-Actualization; he envisioned "educative communities" as a social goal but focused more on the individual than Lindeman did with his penchant for social action. In this way they tilted in different directions, but in the arena of *how* adult education should best be done, they spoke almost with one voice. Knowles, the younger man by 28 years, would eventually move beyond his mentor—recalling Nietzsche's maxim "One repays a teacher badly if one always remains nothing but a pupil" (Nietzsche, 1954, p. 180)—and would develop a mature model for adult education that he called andragogy, a term with nineteenth century European origins that Knowles heard from a Yugoslavian adult educator. Intriguingly, Lindeman had also used the term at least once, but had never developed it into a system of adult education.

But Knowles did. Knowles was as egalitarian as Lindeman, and was completely in accord with Follett's and Lindeman's notion of "power-with" rather than "power-over." For Knowles, the "theological foundation" (his term) of adult education was the learner's, not the instructor's, ultimate control over the learning objectives and process—a repudiation of the instructor control common to almost all formal education. In practice, Knowles' learner and facilitator worked in a collaborative, "power-with" relationship, with objectives and process mutually determined through the use of a learning contract. Both men saw adult education as wholly voluntary since the idea of mandatory adult education was anathema—indeed, a contradiction in terms, as it violated the fundamental principle of adult autonomy. Both men valued experience in adult learning, not only as acknowledgment of adults' adult status, but as a basis for further learning. *The Meaning of Adult Education* states quite early that "the resource of highest value in adult education is the *learner's experience*" (Lindeman, 1926, p. 6, emphasis in original). Similarly, one of Knowles' six assumptions about the adult learner that underlay the entire edifice of andragogy was number three: "Adults come into an educational activity with both a greater volume and different quality of experience from youths" (1989, p. 83), and facilitators were expected to tap into that reservoir of experience to promote further learning. Concerning the learning context, Lindeman asserts that "the approach to adult education will be via the route of situations, not subjects" (p. 6), while number five of Knowles' assumptions says the same: "In contrast to children's and youth's subject-centered orientation to learning (at least in school), adults are life centered (or task centered or problem centered) in their orientation to learning" (p. 84). Lindeman's vision of adult education was democratic, egalitarian, non-hierarchical, and lifelong; it was focused on problem solving, was mostly non-formal, and was quite the opposite of "schooling," with schooling's emphasis on one-way communication and depositing information and knowledge bits into the heads of sometimes unwilling learners. All these qualities are embedded in Knowles' later model of andragogy, designed for adults, which he contrasted with pedagogy, designed for children. While Lindeman's emphasis on social action exceeded that of Knowles, and Knowles' emphasis on learner control exceeded that of Lindeman, they were entirely simpatico on the role of collaborative, situation-based problem solving as the desired approach for adult learning, rather than an expert transmitting knowledge and the student regurgitating it. Knowles did move beyond Lindeman in

the construction of a detailed andragogical model for facilitating adult learning, including the “magical tool” of learning contracts. But many of the components of that model can be found in Lindeman, and in particular in his *The Meaning of Adult Education*. The fact that Knowles is still probably the best-known American adult educator is also testimony to the legacy, influence, and vision of Lindeman.

Professor Marescotti thus performs a needed service in her translation of Lindeman’s *The Meaning of Adult Education*, especially to an audience that associates American adult education, she assures me, so closely with Malcolm Knowles. Confessing to my regrettable ignorance of Italian, I am nevertheless confident that her translation captures the essential Lindeman of 1926—both the book’s virtues, including its precocious ideas, its sometimes epigrammatic prose style, and its manifest evidence of wide and liberal reading, from Aeschylus to Machiavelli to John Stuart Mill; but also the book’s flaws, including its peculiar chapter titles, its almost shameless aversion to specific supporting facts and details in favor of soaring generalization, and its occasionally ethereal sentences which may seem to get lost in the clouds of Socratic musings and speculations. But given the lofty eminence on which Lindeman stands, as an American adult educator I thank Professor Marescotti for introducing to the Italian audience one of the most important voices in American adult education.

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