

# excerpt based on Emerging and Historical Trends in Adult Education and Training

(keynote delivered at the BC Teachers' Federation Adult Educators' Conference 2004)

by Douglas Fleming

■ Adult education is filled with its own unique set of concepts and terminology. However, the definitions and concepts that frame our work as adult educators is highly contested ground. Even though we all tend to downplay the importance of terminology, I believe it is important to note how terms and concepts frame our work and go a long way toward defining it. Moreover, as I try to show below, the current struggles over how we conceptualize our work afford us a unique opportunity.

In this short piece, I draw primarily from Malcolm Tight's very useful *Key Concepts in Adult Education and Training*. In this text, Tight examines and focuses on the debates pertaining to two of the major concepts in adult education: *lifelong learning* and *communities of practice*. Please note that although I am using Tight's book as a way of organizing this piece, the opinions I express are my own.

In his discussion, Tight examines the impact of *globalization*, and deals with the interrelated concepts of *lifelong education*, the *learning organization* and the *learning society*. Tight's discussion of lifelong learning examines the contested nature of adult education through explicating how the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) uses the term. *Lifelong learning* has become almost something of a truism today. We live in an age when schooling never stops.

Now, as adult educators with career stakes in the professional claims of adult education (don't forget that until fairly recently most adult education in Canada was taught by amateurs), we might be tempted to describe institutionalized *lifelong learning* as a good thing. The mind continues to grow and explore into adulthood (maybe even more so). If we look at this concept uncritically, we might say that we are merely describing a natural process.

However, it's important to note that *lifelong learning* was a term first coined by the OECD in 1996. In a nutshell, the OECD has put a lot of energy into defining adult education internationally using parameters that try to establish goals for international economic development. Through its

educational secretariat, the OECD has developed extensive criteria that are used by funding organizations like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. International loans are often now tied, amongst other things, to promises by Third World governments to retool its provision of adult education. These goals usually identify work skills, abilities and competencies that these governments are to foster for explicit economic purposes. These skills are not framed in the way that Freire suggested. These skills are instrumentally linked to the economic needs of the elites within the nation-states in question and, more particularly, those of international capital. Needless to say, there's little talk of empowering the oppressed (beyond a few lucky or co-opted individuals) and lots of explicit support for market economies.

Now, Roger Boshier (2001) contends that *lifelong learning* has co-opted *lifelong education*, a term coined by Faure (1972) and developed extensively out of discussions in the late 1960s that took place under the sponsorship of UNESCO. These discussions featured prominent progressive adult educational theorists such as Illich, Friere, Reimer, Goodman and Holt. *Lifelong education* is something that builds a *learning society* in which education is provided through many venues. This means that an individual has a right to broad choices in education so that one can enter and exit educational systems without penalty. Education would also take place in business, industrial and agricultural settings. More importantly, *lifelong education* has the purpose of developing emancipatory learning communities and societies.

UNESCO is an organization in which great ideological struggles takes place. Tight seems to be more critical of UNESCO than Boshier and problematizes the organization's role to a greater extent. If you check out the UNESCO website, it does seem like the organization has slowly begun to put vocational training at the top of its agenda since the heady days when it sponsored the progressive 1996 Delors Commission on Education. On the other hand, the next big UNESCO project, the UN Decade for

Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014), has sets of principles that are critical of capitalism and goals that include alleviating poverty and enhancing gender and human rights.

Zahra Bhanji provides a very good analysis of how and why the World Bank and the OECD have been promoting adult education for purposes of development (as they define development, of course). She notes that since 1992, the World Bank has become very interested in eliminating world illiteracy, especially in Africa. She believes that the pious statements made by the Bank in this regard are an attempt to deflect criticism from its other policies, most famously protested against during meetings of the G7 leaders. Forty per cent of all international aid programs that target education are now funnelled through the World Bank and use OECD criteria. Bhanji notes that official estimates of illiteracy have dramatically dropped in recent years. Some sources suggest that illiteracy has dropped from 40 per cent of the world's population to 25 per cent in the past decade and credit the World Bank's role in this achievement. While this is almost universally acclaimed as being a good thing (although Ivan Illich might have disagreed), one should question what kind of content is being taught by these World Bank initiatives. As I've mentioned, the OECD criteria are unreservedly pro-capitalist. Bhanji also points out that the money funnelled through the World Bank for these projects is not new money, but represents a reallocation of existing money that might have been otherwise allocated by other agencies with different criteria.

In any case, for both Tight and Boshier *lifelong learning* has usurped the progressive agenda of *lifelong education* and is in the process of turning adult pedagogy into what Tight calls a treadmill of endless and unremittingly narrow skill training that serves the interests of market economics.

Linda Shohet is very good at mapping out how the OECD agenda has influenced the Canadian literacy movement. She notes, for example, how literacy being transferred to Human Resources Development Canada has helped push the literacy movement into becoming much more concerned with employability skills.

In light of all the above, what does the future hold?

Tight makes a number of predictions for the conceptual development of the field. These include:

- that adult education and training will continue to be politicized;
- that there will be a continual recycling and renaming of basic notions;

- that the **liberal/vocational** divide within the field will continue;
- that theoretical work will intensify around the concepts of *the learning organization, the learning society* and *lifelong learning*;
- that there will be continued development and popularization of notions surrounding *further, higher, adult and continuing education*;
- that there will be a growth of work-related concepts related to *human* and *social* capital;
- that there will be a development of concepts that will enhance how *andragogy* is understood; and
- that there will be a refinement of the concepts of *success, failure, competence* and *outcomes*.

Tight's list highlights the dynamic and contested nature of our field. On the one hand, this contestation is often confusing. On the other hand, it shows that we are at a time in history when we have the opportunity of seizing the intellectual (and political) agendas for the benefit of our learners in a way that resists the market-driven approaches promoted by the OECD. This opportunity has an enhanced meaning in Canada, where the boundaries and connections between ESL and literacy have been poorly established because of our history as an immigrant-receiving nation.

In my opinion, our theoretical work in this respect is best based on the practical experiences of teachers (and other educational workers). Given the fact that the field is highly dynamic, I think it best to now go back to those people who have to negotiate these conceptualizations on a daily basis. ■

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