Responding to ‘911’: Coolie Verner’s call to action in the 1950s
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Abstract: There are strong voices in our adult education traditions to help us face the post-911 world courageously in face of extremist tendencies to restrict our democratic rights and responsibilities under the guise of a war on terror. Coolie Verner’s scholarly publications during the 1950s illustrate how one of us worked thorough our commitment to social justice in a time of fear and extremism.

We need to recover our strong voices in the adult education movement to meet the momentous changes and dangers facing us since September 11, 2001 – ‘911’. We need to locate those critical adult educators from the past willing to face controversy and unpopular positions as part of adult education’s commitment to individual improvement and collective action while creating a better social order. We need to recover these role models if we are to influence public policy and avoid being mere observers as the commodification of culture (Rifkin, 2000) continues uncontested. We must create an image of adult education to counter the dominant image of the war metaphor that pervades our language, a new image of hope based on critical dialogue, social responsibility and direct action. To this end, during times seemingly intolerant of critics of oppressive state power similar to current conditions, I look for this kind of commitment in the contribution of Coolie Verner to our literature during the 1950s.

I want to make three points in this paper. First, the modern adult education movement grew out of a commitment to peace, justice and democracy, and this was explicit in Coolie Verner’s scholarly work in the 1950s. Second, that commitment faded during the decade when cold war terror and fear of the bomb forced issues of social justice into the shadow of socio-political reaction and patriotic fervour especially in the US. This climate also encouraged adult education scholarship to obey the positivist claim to ‘scientific rigour’ and ‘objectivity’. Third, these events and trends seem unknown in a field uncaring of its historical traditions, a point Verner made time and again. Yet these traditions are our roots as a field of practice and as a movement, and can provide the comfort and security we need to face the brave new world emerging from 911.

Some of us might remember Verner as a major force in the early years of the Commission of Professors of the Adult Education Association – he was the first Chair -- and the author of the first booklet published by the Commission in the series intended to articulate adult education as a field of study (Verner, 1962). Some of us might remember him as a prolific writer of 275 publications mainly in adult education, rural sociology and historical cartography (Dickinson, 1979). He was one of the early professors of adult education with a strong historical consciousness and he made a significant contribution to the history of adult education, for example in reproducing Poles History of Adult Schools first published in 1816 (Verner, 1967). Verner established the first Canadian doctoral program in adult education at the University of British Columbia in 1961.

I start with Coolie Verner’s thoughts in print published during the 1950s as he moved from graduate studies in adult education to a leadership role in the emerging academic discipline of adult education. He directed much of his attention to the study of the relationship between adult education and community development (CD). He had attended Columbia University in 1950 to study rural sociology and adult education after gaining practical experience in the field
of CD with the Ogdens in Virginia before and after military service during World War II. His earliest writing contained reference to CD as a process of co-operative management of local change based on programs of democratic self-help (Verner, 1949). Verner pursued this interest in his doctoral studies at Columbia and later while a member of the faculty at Florida State University and the University of British Columbia. As a Fulbright Fellow living in Britain in 1953, he declared the new “co-operative movement (i.e. community development)” was “education in the highest form” (Verner, 1953). He borrowed examples from the University of London’s leadership training program for colonial officers and concluded “community development has been recognized as offering the most powerful medium thus far developed for educating adults to the responsibilities of democracy”.

By the end of the decade however, Verner shifted from a ‘youthful’ passion for community based democratic processes to a discipline focus where he defined CD as a method of education. Why? What was going on in the 1950s that might help us understand this shift? Was this shift typical of adult educators in the fifties? His early writing contained reference to CD as a process of co-operative management of local change based on program of democratic self-help. He saw a prominent place for adult education in important issues such as the US Supreme Court’s declaration in 1954 that segregation was unconstitutional. He and Ralph Spence responded to the challenge by calling for broader and more vital forms of adult education for community based social action (Spence and Verner, 1954). In 1953, Verner had reflected optimistically on adult education’s possibilities for “tomorrow’s world” and wrote:

It must create the divine discontent that will prompt people to want to share in effecting changes in their social environment. Furthermore, it must equip them with the skill to determine the kind of world they want and with the ability to set about achieving it for themselves (Verner, 1953, p. 41).

His advice to universities was clear and direct, and included the first statement in the adult education literature about the potential value of action research -- an approach to knowledge making committed to immediate application of what we are learning.

Existing university personnel cannot provide this kind of training unless they too become a part of it through action-research with adult groups. Has traditionalism so pinioned our university departments that they are incapable of creating an adequate university curriculum for adult educators?

We might ask the same questions fifty years later.

Translating knowledge into action has always been a fundamental part of adult education. Writing in 1926 about the meaning of adult education, Eduard Lindeman cautioned “Once we lose the sense of active participation in affairs, we sink to the level of inaction, or what is worse, silent opposition” Lindeman, 1926, p. 37). For him, “adult education specifically aims to train individuals for a more fruitful participation in those smaller collective units which do so much to mould significant experience”. Moreover:

Experience is, first of all, doing something; second, doing something that makes a difference; third, knowing what difference it makes. Our personalities count for something; we enjoy experiences in proportion to the effectiveness of our actions (p. 87). This sort of action is not chaotic or thoughtless; rather it is critical and disciplined -- as is adult education in its most active form. Lindeman wrote these words in the relatively tranquil 1920s in the United States. His fellow adult educators in the angry 1930s interpreted this action component to mean direct social action causing fundamental changes in the social system itself.
Many of our colleagues during the Depression were active in building what later became known as the ‘welfare state’ – an unsuccessful attempt to eliminate poverty and oppression from our country.

The 1950s produced a lively debate about the functions of adult education as we again tried to move from the margins of the educational system into the main stream. John Walker Powell and Kenneth Benne (1960) summed up the decade by distinguishing the developmental and the rationalist as the two main schools in adult education. The developmental school had two divisions; fundamental education dominated by CD and human relations’ education focusing on group dynamics. They suggested the rationalist camp operated under many banners including liberal arts, reading-discussion, great books and the humanities. They concluded that American theories of adult education were polarized ‘not to say ionized’ around the two camps (Powell and Benne, 1960, p. 50). Whether or not education should emphasize purely intellectual or purely emotional analysis, conceived as opposite ends of a continuum, was the main issue. In the middle ground was “a span of effectual personal and civic action which forms one of the goals at both extremes”. Powell and Benne maintained adult education had to span the extremes and serve individual and social needs through a combination of education and social action.

Notions of direct social action were controversial in adult education during these years of McCarthy witch-hunts and cold war fears, but the debate was open and lively in the American literature. At the same time, the main Canadian adult education journal – *Food for Thought* – was not in tune with the troubled times as was its American counterpart (Pyrch, 1983, p. 226).

Verner himself changed his position by the end of the 1950s when he reacted to what he considered to be the excessive claims of some CD enthusiasts (Pyrch, 1983). His hope that “divine discontent” would encourage people to participate in social change activities faded during the decade. By 1960, he suggested that learners required education “essential to adjustment to change” while preserving the social order (Verner, 1960, p.166). The notion of adjustment to change suggested a remedial role for adult education rather than the directive role he had implied in 1953. He seemed wary of the CD fashion. “For some devotees,” he observed in 1959, “it is a panacea to be embraced with ardor and espoused with religious fervor” (Verner, 1959, 254). Verner suggested the panacea had arisen “as a result of the tendency to ascribe values to an adult education method which are, in reality, associated with the behaviour which may occur in a community as a result of the learning achieved through the method” (Verner, 1959a, p. 50). Was this social science removing itself from the subjective side of direct action by trying to gain ‘scientific’ legitimacy by claiming an objective once removed position?

In our post 911 world, will we have the courage of the ‘youthful’ Verner to address directly the challenges of the war on terror we face and the accompanying erosion of our human and legal rights? He did this during times when criticism of the social order could easily be interpreted as disloyalty or even treason. Yet he backed off from advocacy of education for social action and directed his energies to the discipline. As a post-911 adult educator, I need to find his courage to address the looming dangers directly and imaginatively. I see these dangers in such images captured in the full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* on 10 March 2002 placed by ‘Americans for Victory Over Terrorism’. Americans are called upon to ‘support democratic patriotism when it is questioned’. I do this because it is part of our traditional responsibilities. I need to facilitate adult education as a countervailing force to the emerging threats to our democracy. I think Verner would expect it of me, his last doctoral student. Yet will I too back off from advocacy and retreat into the safe confines of discipline building? Or is there a certain courage required to work on the discipline as well? Will I acquire the skills
required to work smart in my organization (Foley, 2001) to counter the commodification of
knowledge? Is each generation of adult educator expected to place us strategically to help social
movements move? This last question challenged Verner himself as he thought we were asking
the same questions from generation to generation in a repetitive rather than developmental way.

Verner had a lifelong interest in history and historical cartography, and he lamented the
apparent disinterest in adult education history both within the movement and within the
discipline. He urged us to explore our history since without clearly articulated historical
traditions a discipline could not claim legitimacy. Historical inquiry was essential to prove the
hypotheses in his theory of method (Verner, 1975). One consequence of this disinterest was a
persistent recurrence of the same problems generation after generation. In effect, each
generation of adult educators begins anew so that the field becomes repetitive and
circular rather than lineal and developmental (Verner, 1964, p. 256).

Perhaps each generation has to be circular in the sense that we need return time and again
to societal issues that do not go away – issues of peace, justice and democracy. Perhaps a spiral
image captures our work rather than a circle. What goes around comes around but does it come back exactly the same as it was when it left? Verner shifted away from advocating
community-based democracy to defining CD as a method of adult education. Instead of
devoting our current energies to fine tuning the discipline, do we more urgently need to return to
our earlier commitment to issues of peace, justice and democracy? Can we create alternative
images to fighting terror with terror? Can we recover Verner’s courage to take on politically
sensitive issues like desegregation at a time when the cold war was creating a new tyranny at
home? We require this kind of courage to retain our integrity in the post-911 world. Will we be
forced by events and pressures to retreat into critical discourse and continue to build the
discipline? Would this in fact be a retreat? Does this integrity include critical advocacy that in
itself is committed to direct action in the face of any tyranny to throttle democracy? We need to
attend to these and other questions related to our influence on public policy at this conference.
This is the time for lively debate prior to taking direct action to facilitate a democratic life.

I have written this paper to remind us of our traditional commitment to peace, justice and
democracy at a time when this commitment could get us into trouble with trends antithetical to
these values in the post-911 world. I introduced Coolie Verner’s scholarly work during the
1950s to illustrate how socio-political conditions influence our historical positions and help
mould our field and movement. In so doing, I am Honouring his commitment to history and
historiography as important and practical attributes of our fields of practice and study. Lastly,
in ‘recovering’ Verner, I want us to remember an important contributor to the Canadian and
American adult education movement. Roger Boshier (1995) gave us a snapshot of Verner from
a psychologist’s perspective and this provides us with one interpretation of Verner as an
individual man. My snapshot is Verner the historical man whose professional life reflected his
time and place. Will we face the post-911 world with the courage he faced his world fifty years
ago? How can we do less?
References