Canadian Research in Adult Education in The 1990’s: 
A Cautious Cartography

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Abstract: This paper presents the results of a collaborative mapping project undertaken by three scholars who examined leading journals, graduate theses and conference proceedings from 1990-2000. Recent trends, areas for future inquiry, and some of the tensions and dilemmas experienced while undertaking such a ‘mapping’ project are outlined.

Why Map Canadian Adult Education Research?

The twentieth anniversary of CASAE appears to be an appropriate time to examine issues and themes appearing in recent adult education research in Canada. ‘Mapping’ projects have been undertaken by many others to help identify the boundaries and dynamics constructing the adult education field. Handbooks and encyclopedias are produced regularly amidst critique of their politics and exclusionary boundaries. In 1982, Rubenson analysed the production of knowledge in North American adult education up to that year and found an overwhelming influence of individual-focused psychology, empirical methodology, and isolationism of the field. Grace (1999) examined post-war US adult education (1945-73) and identified ideological perspectives and beliefs governing research which tended to promote coherence, coordination, community needs and professionalization to meet demands of rapid change. Renewed interest in mapping the field of adult education has appeared recently with Jarvis, Holford and Griffin (2000) noting both the fragmentation and the growth in the field, as well as new modes of teaching. They announced a major project to “demarcate” and trace back these shifts. The dramatics shifts in paradigms of contributing fields has motivated Rubenson (2000) to revisit his mapping project. Our project is similarly motivated.

We have focused our exploration on Canadian research because we believe this 20th anniversary of CASAE is a good excuse to spotlight the contributions and interests of Canadian scholars. Considering the growing global possibilities for exchanging of ideas, one weakness of this geographical closure is to perhaps falsely demarcate a community. We believe that Canadian adult education researchers share certain scholarly currents and socio-cultural influences that are unique and deserve analysis in their own right. For purposes of manageability we have delimited our period of exploration to the period 1990-1999. This was a decade of cutbacks in Canadian institutions, yet graduate student research has continued to expand, even leading the blurring of disciplinary boundaries. This period also has witnessed increased public attention and policy directed to ‘lifelong learning’ and training, dramatically altered modes of adult education delivery, as well as the rapid diffusion of postmodern and other new scholarly perspectives in the extant body of adult education study.
Problems of Mapping

From the beginning of this project we focused not only on our own analyses, but also on the politics of mapping. Through email dialogue we explored our particular motivations for undertaking this mapping project, noting our biases as well as the limitations of the data. We began by discussing the colonizing impulse of map-making, the dangers of exclusion and distortion, and the uses (intended and unintended) of the resulting products. Our own changing positionality in this process seems a crucial dimension, if difficult to discern. Shauna asked “how have our own experiences of maps and travel, whether adventure or calamity, influenced our approach? What kinds of visual impairments are inherent in the work? What places get missed because we were following only certain clues or driving down certain roads?” Shahrzad wrote about negotiating territories defined by maps. Based on her experience of the Middle East, she also argued about her search for a ‘homeland’ where borders are not about inclusion or exclusion only, they are also about creating identities, hopes, and homes. For Shahrzad the notion of ‘bleeding borders’ references the politics of location which is about crossing borders. She wrote, “I have crossed many borders into Canadian theatre of adult education, where I am trying to create a home that I can call as such, and feel that I ‘belong’ to. I am also crossing the border as a political dissident, because I am unhappy with what is going on. Theories that permeate our field behave like borders. They keep me out of their boundaries, and thus push me to seek refuge somewhere else, such as other disciplines.” In response to Shahrzad’s and Shauna’s emails, Tara commented: “these reflections have been powerful for me, particularly about the politics and hazards of crossing borders and the borders and impoverishment created by certain fashionable scholarly theories and the apparent dawdling of adult education in the face of real pain, real injustice.”

Following this thread, we began to identify those questions about adult education research that we wanted most to pursue in our mapping activity. In the sections below, we each address the more specific issues of why and how we are mapping particular artifacts of Canadian adult education research, how we are negotiating the territory to develop our maps, and where we are finding ourselves travelling in the process. These are answered by each researcher differently, according to her particular interests and the texts she has chosen to examine.
I believe graduate student theses in adult education are a treasure of important literature for at least three reasons. First, they present a wide diversity of issues and contexts, potentially broadening and enriching our academic understandings of what constitutes adult education. Second, they often provide a glimpse of issues brought into the academy directly from practice by practitioners. Third, theses may reflect the influences and potential utility of theories and approaches that make most sense to those who normally have little career investment in advancing particular theories and approaches in a crowded scholarly market. However, I believe that the knowledge produced in graduate student research is under-utilized. Here at the University of Alberta, students do not often publish a paper from their work unless they go on to pursue an academic career. Too often their work sits, dusty and forgotten. I wanted to put these researchers and their issues on the map, so to speak.

While theses vary in quality and passion, most painstakingly explore an issue that was significant to someone in a particular context of practice. So — what questions are these practitioner-researchers choosing to pursue? What traces do their approaches reflect of dominant discourses, hot fashions and passions in the market or the academy? What do they find out that they consider most interesting? What do they appear to avoid? I am also hoping to uncover unique questions, ideological hybrids or shifts, sites of practice-research conflicts, and approaches to conceiving the role of research. Most of all, I want to map the visions of adult education embedded in the questions and methods of these diverse studies.

I have chosen to analyse abstracts of all Master’s and Doctoral theses titles listed annually in the Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education (CISAE) from 1990-1999. While this demarcation of data yield hundreds of texts, the limitation is severe for the following reasons. First, the CISAE lists include only those thesis titles that happened to have been submitted by institutions each year. Some institutions are not represented in certain years, even though adult education theses may have been completed. Second, the CISAE lists normally include only those theses completed as part of a graduate program of adult education. However, much student research directly rooted in adult education is carried out in departments of nursing, pharmacology, agriculture, educational foundations, and others — particularly where institutions do not offer a formally acknowledged doctoral program in adult education for those students who in fact are studying adult education. Third, abstracts of Master’s theses are sometimes difficult to obtain. (We are contacting individual institutions for assistance, but our data remain incomplete). Finally, an abstract is an extremely limited representation of a research project, and it may be inappropriate for us to attempt to address our questions using only these texts.

Nonetheless, as a starting point for the examination of graduate student theses, I have adopted and modified Rubenson’s (2000) questions. What themes and fields of exploration appear to have attracted most interest among Canadian graduate student researchers in adult education? What issues and sites of contestation appear most frequently? When compared to themes and influences documented in other analyses and compilations of adult education research territory, what seems not to be present in Canadian graduate student research? What scholarly traditions (perspectives, methodologies, and theories) appear to influence the research efforts of graduate students in Canadian adult education in the 1990’s? I am proceeding by coding each abstract for the researcher’s gender, institution and level (Master’s or Doctoral); the context of the study (learning location and target
group); the primary and secondary topics; the methodology; and the theoretical orientation to adult education. The resulting information will be compared across categories and analysed for overall patterns. Abstracts are also being analysed qualitatively for themes, guided by the three questions above. However, the following three additional questions certainly motivate my reading of these abstracts. What particularly unique questions, issues or alternative approaches appear in graduate student theses? What different conceptions of the role of research, their own role as researchers, and the relation of their research to practice can be discerned in graduate student theses? What new visions and possibilities for adult education research can be discerned in graduate student these? While I'm unsure these can be answered reliably using my limited data, I intend to note any evidence of these issues – and perhaps ‘map’ them in a second phase of this project.

**Journal Review – Shahrzad Mojab**

A review of six adult education journals was conducted for the period of 1990-1999: *Adult Education and Development; Adult Education Quarterly; Australian Journal of Adult and Community Education; Convergence; International Journal of University Adult Education; International Journal of Lifelong Learning; Studies in the Education of Adults; and The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education*. The following themes were the focus: feminism; labour/employment equity issues; anti-racism; disability issues; social justice/social movements; political participation/citizenship; and globalization. The review revealed five meta-trends in adult education in the nineties and a major shift in the theoretical underpinnings of the field. The following three conceptual shifts hint at changes in the way adult education is structured, as well as its changing role in the global political economy. First, at the beginning of the decade, critical theory is frequently used as the framework to deal with equity and social justice issues. By the end of the decade, postmodernism has gained currency as a theoretical framework. Second, citizenship, liberatory, and radical education have historically been central to the character of adult education. Throughout the decade, these concerns give way to debate over the nature of “new social movements”, and social movement learning emerges as an area of study. Third, the political economy framework for adult education that is based in Gramsci and Marx is overtaken by “transformative” or “transformation” theories of education and social change. Issues arising from the “new social movements” are subsequently interpreted through lenses of personal adaptation, individual transformation and empowerment, rather than through the more politicized, structure/power conscious political economy framework.

Globalization is introduced into the literature in the 90s, and by 1996, a special issue of *Convergence* is dedicated to it. The issue includes articles on structural adjustment, civil society, corporate propaganda, dissolving borders, and environmental degradation. Globalization emerges as a catch-all for describing the global consolidation of capitalist power, the hegemony of American-based consumer/corporate culture, and the process of networking state, non-governmental, and market interests across national boundaries. What is described as “workplace policy” or “institutional restructuring” at the beginning of the decade is subsumed under “globalization” at the end of the decade. Subsequently, globalization had become reified in the

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1 Rachel Gorman, a PhD student assisted with this analysis. Funding support came from a SSHRC Small Scale Grant.
literature, and is taken up as an inevitable phenomenon, rather than a set of human-driven processes. A minority of authors dealing with globalization question the role adult education plays in the global expansion of capital.

*The Australian Journal of Adult and Community Education* is the only journal that addresses Aboriginal issues, publishing nine articles throughout the decade on literacy, learning styles, cross-cultural learning, and higher education. Queer issues and disability issues are almost completely absent from the literature, as are anti-racist issues. The latter is predominantly taken up in terms of multiculturalism, difference in learning styles, and personal narrative, rather than as a system of violence and oppression. Feminism remains a strong thread in the literature throughout the nineties. While the decade begins with a debate in *Convergence* on the limits of feminism, adult education theory and practice, and indeed adult educators themselves, seem to be committed to incorporating feminist research methodologies, and feminist pedagogy. Many strands of feminist praxis are present, including autobiography and narrative, critical pedagogy, class-based approaches, post-structuralism, counselling, and anti-violence approaches. Throughout the decade, articles on women learners in various contexts seem more grounded and solid than articles that take up queer, anti-racist, or disability issues. This may be due to the demographics of adult education researchers and practitioners, and the continued under-representation of various standpoints in the academy.

All articles related to the selected themes were identified, and the theoretical approaches were noted. Out of this list, authors who are identified with specific themes and theoretical approach were noted, along with the key points of contention between authors. Because the data sets were generated journal by journal, any major differences between journals were noted. A list of 24 key words was generated from the entire set of notes. The list included two sets of key words or phrases: the first set was related to the list of selected themes, regardless of how frequently they occurred in the notes. For example, “gay issues” and “disability issues” only occurred twice each in the notes, but were related to our selected themes. The second set were phrases or words that occur frequently in relationship to our themes, for example: “political economy”; “learning society”; or “transformation theory”. These 24 key words were then clustered into related groups, based on how they relate to each other in the literature. For example: folk schools; education for liberation; Freire; civil society; and citizenship all followed interweaving streams in the literature, often with the same authors writing on several topics in the list. The 14 remaining clusters were analyzed according to the major debates that were identified in the literature (for example: “critical theory” is often used as a framework by authors who are critical of postmodernism). The clusters were also analyzed according to the way the terminology attached to certain topics has shifted over the decade (for example: what was referred to as “restructuring” at the beginning of the decade is referred to in terms of “globalization” at the end of the decade). This resulted in five hypotheses about the major trends of the decade. The notes were then re-coded, and a chronological, integrated list of article references was generated for each of the hypotheses.
Review of CASAE Proceedings – Shauna Butterwick

Proceedings from nine CASAE conferences from 1990 to 1999, a total of 499 articles, were analysed and coded using the general categories of gender and institutional location of author(s), language (English or French), topics addressed, methodology, and theoretical framework employed. It was difficult to identify institutional affiliation and whether the author(s) were faculty or students as this information was not provided on a consistent basis. We also coded for the following specific topics: anti-racism, class analysis, sexual identity, citizenship, environment, feminism, globalization, labour education, workplace learning, social justice, social movements, the theory-practice relationship, formal, informal and nonformal learning, lifelong learning, and transformative learning. The findings outlined below represent a preliminary analysis. Or, main questions were: what persists, what has disappeared, what has emerged and what has not been addressed.

Labour and union education issues, social justice concerns, feminism, and studies of literacy were topics that maintained a consistent presence across the decade. Formal, informal, and nonformal learning contexts were also consistently present. There were very few articles addressing the role of adult education in relation to anti-racism, class struggles, and heterosexism. Concerns with the environment also received limited attention, although it began to appear as an issue in the last few years of this decade, as did the anti-oppression foci already mentioned. There was a steady decline in the number francophone articles. The context of work and employment dominated the discourse with fewer studies which examined the role of adult education in community and civic organizations. Learning and adult education within social movements was also a persistent focus, although minor in comparison to those articles where the workplace, the learning organization, and union and labour education were central. Explorations of professional development and continuing education focused mainly on the health professions, with nursing education and practice being more frequently explored. A focus on rural adult education was infrequent and almost nonexistent at the end of the decade.

A range of methodologies were utilized including qualitative case study and ethnographic methods like interviews and participant observation, surveys and questionnaires, phenomenography, document analysis, historical analysis, action and participatory methods, and various kinds of statistical methods. Qualitative methods, however, dominated this decade. A substantial portion of the articles were not empirically-based; position papers, literature reviews, and explorations of conceptual resources and their utility for the field were common as were articles that presented personal reflections. There were a few historical studies and relatively few inquiries that focused on policy. As Shahrzad found, most empirical work focused on individuals and there was little evidence of inquiries that employed an institutional or structural analysis.

The conceptual and theoretical approaches informing the inquiries in the CASAE proceedings were as diverse as the methodological approaches. Not surprisingly, there was a

2 I was unable to obtain the 1995 proceedings.

3 Lyn Harper, a PhD student in our department assisted me with this analysis which was supported by funding from the Research Development Grant in the Faculty of Education at UBC.

4 Further analysis will be undertaken prior to the CASAE conference.
predominance of learning theory (socio-cognitive theory, constructivism, enactivism, feminist theory, e.g. ‘women’s ways of knowing’, self-directed learning, transformative theory and andragogy). Critical theory, particularly feminist approaches, were also commonly utilized. Postmodern, often with reference to Foucault’s work, as well as poststructuralist frameworks became more common during the last few years of this decade. Sociological and psychological orientations were the main disciplinary territories. On rare occasion, political economic orientations and notions of performativity, borrowed from postmodern literary theory, made an appearance. At times, it was difficult to identify what theoretical arena the authors were situating their work in. We also noted that many articles were descriptive in character with minimal evidence of theoretical or conceptual analysis.

Having completed this initial analysis we are struck with how frequently adult education in the context of work was the focus of conference papers. This raises the question of whether we can continue to claim that the field and study of adult education acknowledges the importance of learning that is life-wide and lifelong. Some of the issues we would like to further investigate include voice, use of metaphoric language, approach to theory, positionality, methodology, as well as other elements identified in dialogue with my two co-authors and with participants at the 2001 CASAE conference.

Endnote

What comes into view, whether it be graduate theses, or journal articles or conference proceedings, is a substantial volume of work and effort undertaken by students and faculty. It speaks to adult education research and theorizing being ‘on the map’, having a presence, a voice, but who is listening, who are we are speaking to--each other, those outside our field of study, ourselves? This project illustrates some tensions and perhaps contradictions. We observed some evidence of reification and entrenchment, gate keeping and maintaining of borders, at the same time as witnessing movement and diversity and blurring of boundaries. What does this diversity and ‘borderless’ quality mean for our role as educators, for the development of adult education curricula? Is there--should there be, a ‘core’ or ‘foundation’ of adult education that informs our programs and teaching? Can this analysis help us guide students in their research? What does this analyses suggest about the future of this field’s academic legitimacy? What does this analyses suggest about the potential of adult education research to contribute to action on urgent questions of a suffering world? We invite the participants of the CASAE 2001 conference to consider these questions, and to raise others, as we continue our conversation at the beginning of this millenium.

References:
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