Midterm Exam: Is Adult Education a Profession?

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EDAE 520

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October 24, 2010

Abstract:

Is adult education a profession? Should it be?

This midterm paper will examine these two questions. My conclusions are derived from reflection of our readings, class discussions, and personal experience. The viewpoints expressed in our text and discussions present compelling arguments for and against the professionalization of the evolving field of adult education in response to a changing world. After careful reflections of these arguments and my personal experiences, I believe that adult education as it is traditionally defined is and should be a profession, but within a limited context. However, when the pro and con arguments are applied to the concept of adult education in the broader sense that we have examined in class, I believe that the impracticalities associated with total professionalization are difficult if not impossible to overcome, and that the probable detractions outweigh the intended benefits.

However, within the various facets of adult education as defined under the umbrella perspective presented in this course, I do believe that enhancing professionalism through organized, interdisciplinary communication can and should be the goal of all adult educators as we strive to meet the current and future collective educational challenges that we face.

Is adult education a profession? Should it be?

To answer these questions, I will first explore the terms “adult education,” “profession,” and “professionalization.” Having done so, I’ll examine the arguments presented in our text and discussions for and against the professionalization of adult education. Lastly, I’ll answer these questions by offering my perspective and resulting conclusions advocating professionalism over professionalization.

**Understanding the Terminology**

The traditional perspective of the term “adult education” relates to learning programs for adults who were denied the opportunity of attending or never graduated from high school, or who lack English language skills because they have immigrated from somewhere else. This perspective was reinforced by President Bush in an executive order from 2007 where he defined adult education as:

…teaching or instruction below the postsecondary level, for individuals who are 16 years of age or older, designed to provide:

(i) mastery of basic education skills needed to function effectively in society;

(ii) a secondary school diploma or its equivalent; or

(iii) the ability to speak, read, or write the English language (Bush 2007).

In essence, this popular but limited perspective of the term “adult education” typically encompasses General Educational Development (GED) and English as a Second Language (ESL) programs. Such programs limit their focus to meeting the most basic educational needs of its adult learners. These programs are more accurately characterized as Adult Basic Education (ABE), one facet of the redefined, broader field of adult education.

Throughout EDAE 520, we’ve examined this broader understanding of adult education and the complexities that characterize it. Through our chapter review assignments and other coursework, my personal perspective of adult education has expanded beyond ABE to also include adult participation in formal higher education, workplace based education, and other forms of informal and formal education that focus on spirituality, health and wellness, and environmental learning, as well as other organizational and institutional learning that caters either partially or exclusively to adults. In this broader sense of the term, adult education encompasses diversity on so many levels – diversity in its application; its venues; its learners, their backgrounds, motivations, and desired outcomes; and its practitioners. This diversity is even reflected in our class group. “We are conference organizers, leaders, construction managers, middle school teacher mentors, and river boat captains who…teach adults in the course of our daily professions” (Mitchell 2010).

We call ourselves “adult educators,” yet that term holds different meanings for each of us. You may mean that you are a literacy teacher, continuing education instructor, continuing professional educator, labor educator nonprofit staff, instructional designer, human resource developer, K-12 educator, corporate trainer, higher education administrator, extension agent, prison educator, organization development consultant, college professor, career development counselor, community activist, health educator, public official or something else. The dizzying array of adult education occupations and contexts is what makes our field dynamic and diverse, yet difficult to define (Bierema 2010, p 135).

Given this diversity, the unification of adult education under one “profession” is problematic. While each of these occupations encompasses the education of adults, their differences outweigh their similarities with regard to purpose, goals, techniques, and learner base, among other factors. For many these educators of adults, adult education is a secondary, not primary occupational focus. They practice adult education as a part of a broader career identity.

Citing work previous work (duTont, 1995), Bierema (2010) provides an understanding of the term “profession.”

The concept “profession” is traceable to the Latin *profiteri,* meaning a public pronouncement of certain principles and intentions and devotion to a certain way of life. Professions have either explicit or implicit codes of conduct and are based on rigorous training and study to learn the field. Professions are sustained through research literature, and legislation (Bierema 2010, p 138).

When applying this standard collectively to the array of occupations discussed above, some but not all of the criteria are applicable or practical to implement. Each sub-discipline of adult education has its own priorities, norms, and standards as well. Bierema’s (2010) perspective of the term profession further illustrates the problematic nature of viewing adult education as a profession.

Shanahan, Meehan, & Mogge (1994, as cited in Deming, 2010), provide an understanding of the term “professionalization”: “The term professionalization indicates a direct attempt to (a) use education or training to improve the quality of practice, (b) standardize professional responses, (c) better define a collection of persons as representing a field of endeavor, and (d) enhance communication within that field” (p. 1). Given these criteria, professionalization within each subfield of adult education is feasible to varying degrees, but the comprehensive professionalization of the field of adult education in its entirety would be very difficult, and perhaps ill-advised. Unification of learning standards, educator qualifications, teaching techniques, assessment procedures, and outcome goals across disciplinary lines present obstacles that create barriers to the undertaking of such a process. As I’ll address later, even if these barriers could be overcome, the standardizations that support and define professionalization create other barriers that inhibit adult learning opportunities, and the freedom of adult educators to serve their diverse learners as they see fit.

**Is Adult Education a Profession?**

Is adult education a profession? Of all the sub-fields I’ve addressed, ABE comes the closest to meeting the criteria discussed. Unlike the other subfields where the education of adults is typically not the central organizational or institutional focus, but an underlying activity undertaken to facilitate or support a broader agenda, ABE does have unification of focus and purpose; the betterment of society through the betterment of adults lacking the knowledge to adequately function in that society. Throughout our readings and discussions, the concept of social justice has emerged as a key element of adult education (Kasworm, Rose & Ross Gordon 2010 page 4). “At the heart of adult education practice and ethics is the belief in equality and equality of educational access, support, and impact upon adults and their communities (Kasworm et al. 2010 p.4). Of all the subfields of adult education, none are more dedicated to this principle than ABE, whose learners are demographically among the most socio-economically challenged in society. These common threads bind those who participate in this version of adult education, lending credence to ABE as a “profession” and identity to its practitioners as “adult educators.”

However, I think even ABE fails to meet all of the standards of a “profession.” As I recently learned while visiting the local branch of Rio Salado Community College’s Adult Education Program as part of our agency assignment, many of the educators teach on a part time adjunct basis with other primary careers. Their educational levels vary, with a bachelor degree being the only real prerequisite to teach. There are no continuous improvement requirements for instructors. Given our perspective on the terms “profession” and “professionalization,” these inconsistencies run contrary to the degree of standardization associated with these terms. However, economics dictate these inconsistencies. Demand for these publically funded, free programs is greater than the economic capacity to offer them. These instructors receive low pay for their services, and are primarily motivated to teach as a form of service to the community. If they were held accountable to the rigid standardizations associated with a profession, fewer instructors would participate and fewer of these learning opportunities would exist to the detriment of those who need them. I’m sure Rio Salado is not a unique or isolated example of this.

Closely aligned with ABE are the subfields of adult education associated with formal continuing education such as higher learning institutions including community colleges, 4 year universities, and trade or vocational schools. On the surface these branches of adult education share common threads with regard to mission, and some common threads with ABE. All offer adult learners the apparatus to advance their knowledge and skills beyond the basic level. However, beyond these basic goals, other factors make it difficult to include them under the title “adult education” in the context of a profession. Depending on how the word “adult’ is defined many of these organizations include adults as learners, but include others as well. Consequently, they do not necessarily identify their organizational purpose as adult education. For public funded universities and community colleges, the term adult education may even carry potential legal ramifications associated with discriminatory practices. These are some of the factors that create issues when considering inclusion of these organizations in a “profession” of adult education.

The advent and current popularity of for-profit institutions of higher learning further complicates the notion of adult education as a profession. These are first and foremost businesses created to make money. Does their profit agenda create the potential for ethical inconsistencies and possible deviations from the standardization requirements inherent in a profession? Is human development a core value within their organizational mission? Would such organizations truly be dedicated to the professionalization of adult education? These are legitimate questions that illustrate the pragmatic challenges associated with viewing adult education as a profession.

For the other subfields previously mentioned, adult education is typically a component of their organizational structure and purpose, but it’s not their primary focus. These learning programs, most noticeably those born from the workplace conduct some form of adult education to facilitate the attainment of other organizational goals. Education and human development are but one branch of their organizational charts. For businesses, the incentives to provide educational opportunities for its members are greater organizational efficiency, employee retention, and/or higher profits. For other organizations such as unions, lobbying groups, political organizations, governmental agencies, prisons and churches, the motive to provide educational opportunities to its members may be political influence, control, power, prestige, fund raising, public service or some other benefit.

Having worked myself as an educator of adults in both a corporation and a trade association, I have experienced firsthand how organizations utilize training programs to accomplish a greater purpose benefiting the organization. In the case of the corporation, training was a way to reduce costs by eliminating or at least limiting expensive mistakes, to improve customer relations thus reducing the risk of governmental intervention or legal action, and ultimately to make more money. In the case of the trade association, educational programs provided a member benefit that facilitated member retention and expansion leading to more dues which were used to fund political lobbying activities. For these and similar organizations adult education provides a means to an end. Adult education is not the end itself. Is inclusion in the profession of adult education a likely organizational goal for these groups? I say it is unlikely.

Is adult education a profession? With the exception of ABE, with its aforementioned limitations, based on the arguments I’ve presented, I believe adult education is not currently a profession.

**Should Adult Education be a Profession? Arguments in Support of Professionalization**

Should adult education be a profession? Many argue that our changing world and the ever growing number of adults engaged in educational pursuits mandate the professionalization of adult education.

Adult participation in formal learning has reached unprecedented levels within the last decade, due to technological advancement, innovative educational programming, the exploitation of adults as a profitable learning market, widespread social acceptance of globalization as a challenge to national economic sustainability, and awareness among middle-income adults that education is the vehicle to career enhancement (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski 2010 page 25).

“The major public issues that confront our communities, our country, and our world call for lifelong learning and change” (Knox & Fleming 2010 page 133). Because of these changes, it is argued that the many facets of adult education should embrace and facilitate the incorporation of all the related fields into one through professionalization. In its current state, the disjointed nature of adult education hinders its legitimacy and political influence as a force dedicated to the social and economic changes necessitated by globalization and the other factors mentioned above. Adult education is largely without a unified voice in public policy despite its growth and increasing relevance. The field and its practitioners are marginalized, existing on the fringe of society as well as the organizations and institutions that engage in adult education (Bierma 2010).

Marginalization in adult education often manifests socially and institutionally. Social marginalization is based on not being in the center group due to sociological factors or positionalities such as gender, race, class, and so forth. Institutional marginalization is how the structure of organizations and delivery systems of adult education often function to disadvantage it…Marginalization puts adult education at a social, economic, and cultural disadvantage (Bierma 2010 pages 140-141).

For adult education to keep pace with the changing needs of an expanding population of adult learners and emerge as a social and political force that can influence society, policy makers, and it’s varied stakeholders, many argue that professionalization is essential.

The following list suggests ways in which professionalization of the field can make a crucial contribution to dealing with the challenges of the coming decade.

a. Professionalization efforts by graduate programs and fieldwide association can clarify a future-oriented vision and distinctive global mission of the adult and continuing education field, as a basis for broad societal commitment and support.

b. Professionalization efforts can help to strengthen connections between scholarship and practice in the field, especially for practitioners in part-time and volunteer roles who are not likely to pursue credit and degree courses.

c. Professionalization efforts can explore ways to improve university commitment, resources, and relations among adult education graduate programs and related disciplines and university priorities.

d. Collaborative professionalization efforts can increase collaborative relations across the field’s umbrella organizations and various segments.

e. Professionalization can enhance concerted attention to action regarding major public global issues to compliment media overviews and encourage constructive social change (Knox & Fleming 2010 page 133).

In theory, the unification of the subfields of adult education in terms of message, standards, and practices through professionalization would liberate it from its current marginal status to one of unified purpose, identity and empowerment. However, in practice is it even feasible and if so is it advisable? Could professionalization potentially do more harm than good to the cause of adult education? Is professionalization the answer to the challenges facing adult education?

**Should Adult Education be a Profession? Arguments Against Professionalization**

Should adult education be a profession? While many favor the professionalization of adult education, others are not supportive of the idea and/or believe it to be unattainable due to its very nature. Again, adult education is characterized on so many levels by diversity over commonality. This diversity imposes barriers to professionalization on both a practical and conceptual level.

On a practical level, the diversity inherent to field of adult education and its broad application conflicts with the processes of unification, standardization and centralized regulation associated with professionalization. Across the various subfields, organizations and institutions engaging in the different forms of adult education establish agendas, standards, methodologies, and goals to meet their unique organizational needs. Furthermore, the needs of one subfield or organization within a subfield may not correspond with and may even be in conflict with those of another. In the real world, organizations that engage in adult education are often in competition with each other, not just for student enrollment and/or employee hiring and retention, but along philosophical and economic lines as well. These organizations are driven by their own self interests. In a free society and a free economy, these organizations function on the premise that they control their own destinies, within the limits of the law, organizational philosophy and the marketplace. . Under the tenets of professionalization, lack of control could easily lead some organizations to curtail or abandon their adult education programs.

Professionalization would not only adversely affect the organizations, but the learners who participate in adult education programs within those organizations.

From one vantage point, professionalization can be seen as an attempt to corral the field into respectability, threatening the ‘free range’ soul of a movement that is uniquely in tune with adults’ natural tendencies and abilities to learn freely without formalized constraints (Knox & Fleming, 2010, pp. 125-126).

As adult educators, we are taught that learner diversity requires flexibility and the need for a variety of teaching strategies to meet the individualized needs of our students. The concept of flexibility is inconsistent with professionalization.

As pointed out in our class discussions, for some the professionalization of adult education is also dubious on a conceptual level.

I think the “Adult Education” is far too nebulous to be put in a box of a “profession.” To me it would be akin to the professionalization of ‘leadership.’ Just what is it? Do I agree that there are some common threads between the various disciplines of adult education that we can capitalize? Sure, but there is so much more that is difficult to define simply as a single profession (Mitchell, 10/06/10).

Citing Merriam and Brockett (2007), Bierma (2010) sums up the pros and cons of the professionalization of adult education best:

Professionalization itself represents opposing goals. On one hand, professionalization helps move the field from marginal status to one of social influence. On the other hand, the field’s absorption into professionalization may create a narrowly conceived field of practice that excludes and marginalizes diverse voices and approaches to adult education (Bierma 2010 p. 137)

**Conclusions**

Is adult education a profession? Should it be? Applying the definitions discussed in this paper, I believe the answer to both questions is no. Adult education represents an array of subfields and disciplines. It is not one profession, nor should it be. The professionalization of adult education is neither feasible nor advisable. On the surface it has merit and noble intentions. In its application, I believe it is doomed to fail. The unification and standardization of a field that is based upon and built upon such extreme diversity cannot work. Professionalization of adult education is incompatible with the nature of adult education.

However, I do believe that individual subfields of adult education can and should strive for greater professionalism within and across their boundaries in as much as is practical. Organized communication via newsletters, periodicals, other publications and conferences could allow for the sharing of best practices in key areas. Those areas mirror the class offerings of the Adult Education and Training program curriculum at Colorado State and should include topics like adult learning theory, instructional design, processes and procedures, distance learning techniques, needs assessment and performance measurement. In addition, professional organizations representing many of the subfields of adult education already do exist, and should also maintain open lines of communication with regard to public policy, common issues, and coalition building when practical and possible.

Adult education does not need to be a single profession to meet the growing and varied needs of adult learners, but it does need to proactively pursue quality and excellence in its many applications. As educators of adults, no matter what we actually call ourselves, we have to be responsible and diligent in our own pursuit of lifelong learning and enhanced professionalism.

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