

Forum / Tribune

Canadian Adult Education: Still a Movement?

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ABSTRACT

In this journal's Fall 2009 issue, the Forum section included an article by Gordon Selman and Mark Selman arguing that although Canadian adult education had existed as a social movement in the middle part of the 20th century, it is no longer a social movement. They also speculated about the causes of this change. In the Spring 2011 issue, Tom Nesbit responded that although the political influence of the field has declined, it is still a movement. He also argued that the purported causes were not significant or not relevant. This response to Nesbit recognizes and accepts the strengths of the field but argues that those strengths do not make it a social movement. It also argues that Nesbit has misconstrued the arguments intended to show that the distinctively Canadian aspects of the movement worked against it in its later years, and that a fear of missionary-like activities worked against a sense of cohesion within the social movement.

RÉSUMÉ

Dans l'édition automne 2009 de cette revue, la section Forum comportait un article de Gordon Selman et Mark Selman affirmant que bien que l'éducation des adultes au Canada avait existé en tant que mouvement social au milieu du 20e siècle, ce n'est plus le cas maintenant. Ils ont également réfléchi sur les causes de ce changement. Dans l'édition printemps 2011, Tom Nesbit a répondu que bien que l'influence politique de ce domaine a diminué, il demeure toujours un mouvement. Il a également soutenu que les causes prétendues n'étaient pas significatives ou pertinentes. La réponse à Nesbit dans cet article reconnaît et accepte les atouts du domaine, mais elle soutient que ceux-ci n'en font pas un mouvement social. On maintient également que Nesbit a mal interprété les arguments destinés à montrer que les aspects typiquement canadiens du mouvement ont nui à celui-ci au cours de ses dernières années, et que la crainte d'activités s'apparentant au missionnariat a entravé un sentiment de cohésion au sein du mouvement social.

In the Spring 2011 issue of this journal (Vol. 37, No. 1, Forum), Tom Nesbit responded to an earlier article by Gordon Selman and me (Selman & Selman, 2009). I am pleased to see such a response as I believe that the issues discussed are of significance to our field. I am also pleased that Nesbit's article celebrates the commitments and the energy of people in the field of adult education. However, I do not think that Nesbit's evidence and arguments establish what he claims they do: that adult education in Canada is (still) a social movement. And at least as importantly, I am concerned that Nesbit has misunderstood my admittedly speculative analysis of the possible causes of the end of the adult education movement in Canada. This response to Nesbit's paper will proceed by reviewing what is at stake in deciding whether adult education in Canada is a social movement, then considering Nesbit's arguments in favour of regarding it as a social movement, and then discussing two of the purported causes of the end of adult education as social movement.

So what is at stake in the central claim that the adult education movement in Canada is dead? Is it just a matter of words? I would argue, and I think that in this case Nesbit would agree, that it is more than a semantic issue because being clear about what we are doing and what our relationship is to the history of our practice is part of our identity. It is difficult to be authentic in our practice if we are mistaken about the nature of our field. Before I got involved in co-authoring the original article, I was quite struck by the realization that Gordon Selman and Alan Thomas, two people who strongly identified with adult education as a social movement, had come to believe that the movement no longer existed. That marked a significant difference, a change in how we might think about our practice. One could see this as a genealogical fact, in Foucault's sense of the word. Of course, they might be wrong, or out of touch, as Nesbit seems to argue. But the fact that they felt that way after having invested a good part of their lives in the development of the movement gave me pause and prompted me to reconsider the nature of the field I work in.

It is worth asking what it was that caused them to believe that the field of adult education in Canada is no longer a movement. Nesbit gets at one aspect of this when he recognizes that the field no longer "enjoys the organizational clout of the CAAE [Canadian Association for Adult Education]," which proved capable of mobilizing large numbers of people and partnering successfully with organizations such as the National Film Board and the CBC. He also admits that "adult educators' influence on government policy at both national and provincial levels has waned." But more fundamentally, the designation "movement" implies something of a shared vision and, just as important, a commitment to using the capacities of those in the field to benefit others. So what was that vision and who was to benefit?

Essentially, the vision was a liberal one, not a radical one. One factor that unites such initiatives as the Antigonish movement, Frontier College, Radio Farm Forum, Countrywomen of the World, and Citizens Forum is that they sought to improve opportunities for individuals within a system. They were not primarily about overturning the system. In this sense they were about equality and social justice, but the conceptions of equality and social justice were understood through a lens of optimism about progress, particularly in Canada, where it was thought that class structure was largely a thing of the past and that education about matters such as scientific agricultural techniques and international affairs would contribute to Canada's development as an economic force and a peacekeeper on the world stage. The challenge was to ensure that through learning, as many people as possible would have the capacity and inclination to support themselves and take part in public debate and decision making. At the core was the notion that through the intelligent provision of adult education, Canada would become a more equitable society, and one that was seen as a leader in the world by virtue of its setting an example of active and engaged civic participation in public decision making. The immediate

beneficiaries of this movement might be seen to be the fishermen and their families, the farmers, and the new immigrants working in northern communities, but the longer-term goal was society-wide. Equal opportunity plus an informed citizenship would contribute to Canada's leading by example and becoming an influential and constructive player on the world stage.

This vision stands out in distinction from the vision of an educator such as Paulo Freire, who argued that every educational act is a political act and that literacy education among landless workers equips them to change the system in which they live. Education in his context and world view was in favour of the oppressed and in opposition to the oppressor. The Canadian adult education movement on the whole did not understand itself in those terms.

With this background in mind, let me turn to Nesbit's more specific arguments. His first argument is that Canada is recognized internationally for the range and number of its adult education programs. On this we agree. The field is larger and more varied than ever. There are more people in Canada involved in research, more practitioners, and more learners in programs of adult education than ever before. Like Nesbit, I am proud to be part of a strong and growing field, but the amount of activity has little to do with whether the activity is driven by any kind of shared vision or concern, which I would consider a fundamental requirement of being a movement.

His second argument is that there is "a healthy cluster of organizations," with a list that, as usual, gives pride of place to the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education (CASAE) and the Canadian Association for University Continuing Education and continues down to more regional and grassroots organizations with more specific mandates in particular aspects of the field. All this is good. We certainly need such organizations. But it is significant that none of the organizations cited represents the range of interests involved in adult education. Each represents a particular part of the practice or a subset of interests. CASAE has probably the broadest perspective on the field in some ways but is clearly intended to serve the interests of faculty members and students doing research in the field, just as other academic organizations do. Its interests are much more closely aligned with those of other academic organizations than with those of more practitioner-oriented organizations that share an interest in adult education. I know this because back when CASAE was officially a "learned society," I was part of discussions about whether CASAE had the critical mass to accomplish its goals, and at that time my suggestions that CASAE might become more involved with the interests of policy-makers and practitioners in adult education were roundly rejected in favour of trying to ally with other societies with similar research agendas, such as those sister organizations involved in the Canadian Society for the Study of Education. I have seen little evidence since then that CASAE has changed direction in this regard.

I do not say this in order to criticize CASAE or any of the other organizations that Nesbit mentions. I am merely trying to demonstrate that, healthy and useful as these organizations might be, they collectively fail to add up to being a movement because their more particular agendas and interests are more compelling than their sense of being involved in a shared movement.

Nesbit also argues that adult education in Canada should be considered a movement because journals such as this one consistently publish articles demonstrating concern for the roles adult educators can play in social issues and movements. He cites lists of theses produced in the field as evidence that student work is focused on issues of social justice and other concerns of social movements. He also provides an inspiring list of faculty members involved in important social issues. Again, these are all good things that we should be proud of. I do not question that they are true of the field of adult education and the people who work in it. But similar lists of socially committed faculty members, socially engaged thesis topics, and scholarly articles are produced in other disciplines such as sociology, communications, and criminology. In spite of the parallel, no one thinks that sociology, communications, and criminology are themselves

social movements even if faculty and students who study them tend to be concerned about social change and social justice and are engaged in social movements. So what is different about adult education that makes it a social movement when these other disciplines and fields of practice are not?

I would argue that little separates them. As adult education has come of age as an academic discipline, it has, like other academic disciplines, developed a distinctive character and distinctive preoccupations that are related to but distinct from the interests of what the policy-makers like to call "adult learners" and from practitioners. At the same time, the field of adult education practice has also grown and diversified to the point that it is no longer held together by a shared sense of purpose or a common vision.

Apart from Nesbit's arguments that adult education is a social movement, he takes issue with the five possible causes of the death of the movement as laid out in our paper:

1. There has been a general retreat from collective action in society, which coincides with the decline of the adult education movement.
2. There is a distrust of "missionary activities," and therefore many groups in society want to manage their own education.
3. The role of universities has contributed to an emphasis on professionalization at the expense of the social movement orientation.
4. The shift to "lifelong learning" has extended the self-assigned mandate of the field of adult education beyond its realistic sphere of influence.
5. The movement was too Canadian and therefore found it hard to gain support as Canada began to measure itself increasingly by American, European, or other international standards.

Nesbit takes issue with each of these purported causes, arguing either that they are not trends or that they are not relevant. I admit that each of these suggestions about the causes of the death of the adult education movement is speculative, but I would also point out that if you do not think that the movement has died, then you are unlikely to think that any of these or any other factors could be the cause of its demise. In this sense, Nesbit's arguments are overdetermined.

In any case, I am quite willing to leave to the judgment of interested readers whether most of these claims are plausible and relevant. In the case of the claims that the field's distinctively Canadian character and the concern about missionary activities have worked against it, however, I feel that Nesbit has misconstrued my arguments sufficiently that I should try to clarify what I was saying.

With regard to my suggestion that the Canadianness of the movement contributed to its end, Nesbit seems to feel that my point was that Canadian adult educators have failed to maintain a distinctive approach. That was not what I was saying. My point was that there was a distinctive approach to adult education in Canada and that the movement of adult education was closely linked to a vision of Canada as a leader in overcoming class distinctions and encouraging full participation in public decision making as well as providing leadership with regard to international peace and co-operation. The CAAE Manifesto of 1943 is an expression of these objectives and values. Unfortunately, Canada has not lived up to that promise over the last 30 years, as has been ably documented by John Ralston Saul in *A Fair Country* (Saul 2008). Part of this failure seems to be a failure of nerve, a lack of willingness to take the risk of steering an independent course in international relations. Another part has been a tendency to allow other nations' standards to be used in measuring the value of Canadian policies and practices.

These related shortcomings have undermined the adult education movement in two main ways. To begin with, they have weakened the plausibility of the vision of Canada as a leader in an increasingly participatory and co-operative approach to international affairs, a key plank in the movement's vision. At the same time, they have meant that any distinctively Canadian movement or organization would be measured and valued according to other nations' standards, thus almost certainly not measuring what was distinctively Canadian and of the most value. More specifically, it was easy for the government not to support the CAAE and its initiatives because they were uniquely designed to fit a Canadian context rather than being copies or imitations of programs that had been established and validated elsewhere. If they had been championed out of Harvard or the London School of Economics, they might have fared better. So I want to be very clear that my point had nothing to do with whether the field of adult education maintained its Canadianness; rather, I was showing how the strength of the Canadian adult education movement became a weakness in making the case for government support because the Canadian government has lost confidence in Canada being a leader in international affairs and in many other ways.

The other major point where I think Nesbit has misconstrued my argument is with regard to the claim that missionary activities encounter in modern times a resistance that has worked against the adult education movement as it was originally constituted. Nesbit seems to think that this is a veiled complaint against radical adult educators attempting to raise critical consciousness. He also seems to feel that it is a factor that adult educators should not be too concerned about, because we start with learners' needs and are dependent on their support for our programs to operate. However, this misses the point of my argument. The point is not whether Nesbit thinks that adult educators act like missionaries by attempting to promulgate their world views (or whether I think this). It is that, in the 1970s, many groups that saw themselves as getting unequal treatment began to redefine inequality in important ways.

So I argued that there was a missionary zeal about many of the most significant projects of the adult education movement. In the case of the Antigonish movement, this zeal was linked explicitly to Christian objectives, with the belief that dealing with economic issues would lead to people being able to take care of their souls. But in less overtly religious ways, the adult education movement was about promoting the liberal virtues of progress through education, equality of opportunity, and civic engagement in democratic processes within a set of assumptions about social progress, meritocracy, and a bright future for Canada. But by the 1970s, this vision was beginning to fray, as people generally became more aware that structural inequalities were not being addressed by means of general enlightenment or simply by providing opportunities to all. Marxist-inspired critiques such as *Schooling in Capitalist America* (1976) certainly added to these concerns by arguing that institutions of public education determine and reproduce inequality, rather than working to eliminate it, and that attempts to reform such institutions were largely counterproductive. At the same time, minority groups began to shift their focus from demanding equal access to "white, male-dominated" institutions to seeking more control over the culture of their communities and the values and practices of the institutions that served them. The black power movement in its original conceptualization was a clear example of such a change, as its leaders no longer looked for equality of access to mainstream institutions but instead sought to build strong communities with their own distinctive priorities and governance over their own institutions.

In the field of adult education, Freire's ideas were becoming a part of how people understood their field; whether or not people adopted an explicitly Marxist approach, they were inclined to be more suspicious about whether "mainstream" organizations could be effective in addressing the challenges of particular groups, be they women, workers, ethnic and linguistic

minorities, or peoples who had suffered under colonialism such as Aboriginal peoples. In Canada, ongoing debates over the sovereignty of Quebec and Aboriginal peoples added a layer of complexity to these issues. In the field of adult education in Canada, the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women can be seen as an outgrowth of this new sensibility, as some women recognized that real change was likely only if they took matters into their own hands rather than trying to work within existing mainstream organizations.

At the same time as energy was going into new organizations with more specific objectives, the Canadian Association for Adult Education was struggling to establish and maintain a board that more clearly represented the diversity of society. Under these conditions, the ability of liberal mainstream organizations, dominated by white English-speaking men in executive and board positions, to advocate for equality of opportunity and decision-making power was weakened. But whether or not the CAAE became more successful in representing the diversity of the people whose interests it represented, the very idea of an umbrella organization becomes less compelling if the interests of specific groups are the first priority, especially if the liberal idea that progress will happen by everyone working together to eliminate or minimize inequalities has been discredited.

This shift in priorities—away from the belief in progress through voluntary action, co-operation, and shared learning toward a conviction that groups need to pursue their specific interests for themselves if they want to see real change—did not result in an overturning of the social order in Canada. But I would argue that it tended to draw away energy and support from the idea of a broad social movement organized around a collective interest in the education of adults as a means for addressing equality and social justice.

But whether or not I am right about this being a significant factor in the death of the social movement (to use our words) or the decline in influence of the field (to use Nesbit's), it may be important for practitioners to consider whether they do act "like missionaries." Nesbit seems to think that the common adult education practices related to being learner-centric are sufficient to protect adult educators from this danger. I am less confident. Perhaps because of my work with First Nations and other groups that have not had much access to some kinds of education, I find that this is a real and pressing issue in much of my work. I see many examples of adult education practice that involve teaching standards and processes of decision making that are common in Western society and that treat these standards and processes as if they were universal and unquestioned, even when they work against the standards and protocols of Aboriginal communities. But for the purpose of the issue under discussion, what matters is that many groups began to feel the need to manage their own interests in their own ways, which drew energy and credibility away from a mainstream movement that attempted to represent all adults and their interest in learning.

So where does this leave us? I suggest that it leaves us with a flourishing field of practice of incredible diversity, from the various types of adult education Nesbit focuses on to the many professional organizations and private training organizations that deliver education to their members and clients on an ongoing basis.

Through my involvement in the Carold Institute, I am fortunate to review proposals for sabbatical projects from dozens of committed practitioners each year. There is no question that the impulse to support social change and voluntary action through innovative practice is alive and well, in many cases led by people who have no sense of connection with the field of adult education per se. But the very diversity of organizations involved in adult education militates against a common vision or shared sense of purpose, quite apart from the challenge of trying to build some kind of network or organization that brings together the range of people who study and practise in the field. The lack of such an organization does not seem to hamper innovative

practice too much, but I suspect that it does limit opportunities for productive interchange and limit impact on government policy. This is a shame, as the adult education lens is important in thinking through issues of social policy and change. But in keeping with the spirit of Nesbit's article, I concur that the absence of a collective voice should not cause us to overlook the strengths and vitality of the field of adult education in Canada.

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BIOGRAPHY

Mark Selman develops and manages educational programs in the Faculty of Business Administration at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, BC, where he has worked for the past 21 years. Most of his work is with large corporations and First Nations communities. He is a former board member of the Canadian Association for Adult Education and a past president of the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education. He is a co-author of *The Foundations of Adult Education in Canada* and has written a number of articles on philosophical and educational topics. His current passion is the development of an EMBA program focused on Aboriginal business and leadership, scheduled to start in September 2012.

Mark Selman développe et gère des programmes d'enseignement à la Faculté d'administration des affaires de l'Université Simon Fraser à Burnaby, en C.-B., où il travaille depuis 21 ans. Il travaille en majeure partie avec les grandes sociétés et les communautés des Premières Nations. Il est un ancien membre du conseil d'administration de l'Association canadienne pour l'éducation des adultes et un ancien président de l'Association canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes. Il est coauteur de l'ouvrage *The Foundations of Adult Education in Canada* et a écrit plusieurs articles sur des sujets philosophiques et pédagogiques. Il se passionne présentement pour le développement d'un programme MBA pour cadres axé sur le leadership et les affaires autochtones, prévu pour Septembre 2012.