

Reviews / Comptes rendus

Learning with Adults: A Critical Pedagogical Introduction

By Leona M. English and Peer Mayo
(Rotterdam, Netherlands: Sense Publishers, 2012, 276 pages)

Learning with Adults: A Critical Pedagogical Introduction comes highly recommended. In pre-publication endorsements, it is touted as offering “new insight into a dark moment in our human civilization” (Dr Carlos Alberto Torres); as providing an “incisive critique of adult education” (Dr Antonio Darder); and as pulling together “the richest publication to date linking and deepening our understanding of critical theory, adult education, and hope” (Dr Budd Hall). That’s just the first three. There are many more.

As Torres states in his preface, Leona English and Peer Mayo offer “a unique and critical perspective on the different policy challenges, theories, and practices prevalent in the field of adult learning and education” (p. xiii). They track various policy mistakes that have led to “a crisis of great epistemological and theoretical proportions in the field” (p. xiii) and to the apparent policy paralysis that accompanies it. But they do it with hope. Hope that “the long term goals of education for life and living can be accomplished alongside professional and vocational education” (p. 1). Hope that adult education can be about promoting social justice and “providing the space for critical examination of our ideas and our practices” (p. 1). As a practitioner of adult education with a keen interest in its political role, I approached the book with great expectations.

The authors wrote the book primarily for the newcomer to the field of critical adult education. Neither a newcomer to the field nor a scholar of it, I looked forward to reading something that would bring me quickly up-to-date on contemporary critiques of adult education. But despite my lengthy experience in providing various forms of adult education and previous incursions into feminist and critical legal theories, I found the book tough going. Some of the difficulty lies in the academic style the authors adopted in writing their book and some is due to the prior knowledge that the reader must have to make sense of the analyses presented.

The book gets off to an awkward and potentially off-putting start. Its first section is meant to contextualize adult education, yet it provides no introduction to the field or its current state. More confusing yet, the first chapter consists of a discussion of the debates around lifelong education/learning, *not* around adult education. In doing so, the authors seem to dismiss the use of the term adult education as an anomaly confined to the United States. But if, as the authors argue, lifelong learning is the most widespread term in use today, why is the term used only in the title

of this chapter and not in the others in the book? A little more explanation of the distinctions between the terms and how they are used in the book would have been helpful. To make matters more difficult, the opening chapter plunges the reader into a critique of the European Union's *Memorandum of Lifelong Learning*. Why? Something to contextualize this critique is badly needed!

The more knowledgeable reader will overlook the book's shortcomings. The "substantive overviews of critical issues and approaches that are integral to practicing and theorizing on adult education" (p. 2) promised by the authors are well done. The book's four sections (1. Contextualizing Adult Education, 2. Contemporary Theoretical Perspectives on Adult Education, 3. Contexts of Practice, and 4. Concerns in the Practice of Adult Education) cover a great deal of ground. Individual chapters deal with specific issues, including the role of the state, neoliberalism, citizenship, Marxism, post-structuralism, post-colonialism, racism, spirituality, and environmentalism. Also as promised, each chapter can stand alone and be read as needed. In that sense, this publication is something of a reference book. If you need to bone up quickly on a particular issue (including the EU's *Memorandum*), you will find this book particularly helpful. It also has an extensive list of references with significant Canadian content, making it particularly useful in this jurisdiction.

In short, this is by no means an introductory discussion of contemporary issues in adult education. Its endorsements come from people with a wealth of knowledge about the field who are, no doubt, thrilled to see their concerns captured in a single text. But take the authors' advice and tackle the book chapter by chapter, starting with those that address issues in which you are most interested.

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