

Reviews / Comptes rendus

The Purposes of Adult Education: An Introduction (Third Edition)

*By Bruce Spencer and Elizabeth Lange
(Thompson Educational Publishing, 2014, 228 pages)*

Bruce Spencer and Elizabeth Lange's third edition of *The Purposes of Adult Education: A Short Introduction* (2014) focuses on adult education as education for the economy, for social change, and for diversity. New to this edition are Chapter 2, "Education for Adults: Understanding the Social," and Chapter 7, "Canadian Adult Education in a Global Context," which includes a twenty-first century overview of adult education issues related to distance and computer-mediated education. Well, that's the party line! If you judge a book by its cover, classify this book as a chameleon. While its outermost skin defines and elaborates on the purposes of adult education, the subcutaneous fibre that binds this book together and makes it worth reading lies in its account of the contributions made by unions and single-minded individuals who banded together under the banner of adult education to move forward sociopolitical agendas. This is a must-read book! It is the best resource I have read on the sociopolitical posturing that has shaped and continues to shape the delivery of adult education in Canada.

Chapter 2 lays the foundation for the need to understand adult education from a sociopolitical perspective. In Chapter 3, "Education for Economy," Spencer and Lang make a convincing argument that the shift to the knowledge economy is nothing more than smoke and mirrors. It is unfortunate that the authors didn't take this theme further and link vocational learning to the cash cows that schools of continuing education have become. In Chapter 5, the authors take liberties and extrapolate beyond the purposes of adult education to provide the historical background on racism in Canada. If for no other reason, read Chapter 5 to get a grassroots—albeit one-sided—view of racism in Canada, in addition to a detailed interpretation of how unions used adult education to push forward their sociopolitical agendas. Drawing from Spencer's personal research interests in workers' education and labour unions—in particular, workplace union organization and workplace learning—Chapter 5 is exceptionally well crafted. Chapter 6, "Education at a Distance: Online and Open," starts out as a breath of fresh air. It poses difficult questions that course designers tend to skirt around when designing distance education. I encourage anyone who teaches online to read this chapter. It provides insights into online pedagogy that I had not encountered before. Yet the authors come full circle and question if distance

education can be considered adult education because its social aspect is muted. Chapter 7 rounds out the book. It posits adult education within a global context, charting the political and economic shifts over the past 60 years that impacted the field of education. This chapter contains an excellent account of the creation of Canada's welfare state and Canada's social safety net along with a précis of the foibles of neo-capitalism.

But let's call a spade a spade. *The Purposes of Adult Education: A Short Introduction* is the best historical account I have read that traces the development of Canada's adult education from a sociopolitical perspective. However, that's very different than providing a balanced examination of the purposes of adult education in the twenty-first century. For this updated edition to hit the bull's-eye of the twenty-first century, it needs to move beyond its comfort zone and address the economic realities and demographic pressures that are changing how postsecondary and continuing education are delivered. It needs to acknowledge the smoldering embers that are bursting into flames as colleges and universities go head-to-head in philosophical debates on credentialing and G-force intelligence versus apprenticeship approaches. This book neglects to redefine the needs of its new audience for continuing education and the demands that clients place on quality. It misses the opportunity to debunk the myth that continuing education is the poor second cousin to a university education. It does not address the purely economic drivers that push the demand for continuing education courses. It examines massive online open courses (MOOCs) from a pedestrian perspective rather than hypothesizing about their potential for development into a commodity that could boost dwindling university tuition revenues and offset reduced government subsidies. There can be no question that continuing education has moved beyond its sociopolitical roots in the women's movement and union advocacy for social justice to being the cash cow of failing monolithic faculties whose academia remain inflexible to change.

Publishers and editors take heed. Be vigilant. Asking authors to edit books by rejigging new content between old cover jackets creates an identity crisis. *The Purposes of Adult Education: An Introduction* faces the same quandary as Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (Stevenson, 1987). Dr. Jekyll must lose the struggle and capitulate to Mr. Hyde's domineering personality to unravel the new sociopolitical stage that shapes the delivery of adult education in the twenty-first century.

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REFERENCE

Stevenson, R. (1987). *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. New York, NY: Signet Classic.