

The Promises of Adult Education and the Realities of the Workforce

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Traditional Tensions

The history of adult education (understood broadly) has seen consistent tensions about what the goals of the field should be.

- Liberal, Humanistic Education
 - Subscription libraries, Lyceums, Women's Literary Clubs
- Human Resource Development
 - Military Developmental Battalions, Conservation of Human Resources Project
- Targeted Work on Vulnerable Populations
 - Clandestine literacy teaching to slaves, Moonlight schools, Freire

(Kaestle, 1991; Kett, 1994; Sticht, 2002; Others)

Policy Milestones (U.S.)

- The Adult Education Act (1966)
 - Adult basic education: Later added ESOL, Citizenship, High School, GED, Post-diploma education, Workplace literacy
- The National Literacy Act (1991)
 - Combines broad literacy goals with workforce development
- The Workforce Investment Act (1998)
 - The Adult and Family Literacy Act
 - The National Reporting System (mandatory starting 1999)

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (2014)

SEC. 2. PURPOSE.

(1) To increase, for individuals in the United States, particularly those individuals with barriers to employment, access to and opportunities for the employment, education, training, and support services they need to succeed in the labor market.

(2) To support the alignment of workforce investment, education, and economic development systems in support of a comprehensive, accessible, and high-quality workforce development system in the United States.

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (2014)

SEC. 2. PURPOSE.

(3) To improve the quality and labor market relevance of workforce investment, education, and economic development efforts to provide America's workers with the skills and credentials necessary to *secure and advance in employment with family-sustaining wages* and to provide America's employers with the skilled workers the employers need to succeed in a global economy.

(5) To *increase the prosperity of workers* and employers in the United States, the economic growth of communities, regions, and States, and the global competitiveness of the United States.

The Debate

- Pros
 - Provides coherence to the adult literacy system
 - Improves accountability
 - Increases competitiveness
 - Helps people get the skills they need and therefore reduces welfare dependency
- Cons
 - Limits the type of education that is offered
 - Accountability is burdensome and counterproductive
 - Is too focused on the temporary needs of employers
 - Doesn't help people get the skills they need in order to reduce welfare dependency

The Realities of the 21st Century Workforce

Looking at the results of the Program of International
Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC):

"Adults who have trouble reading, doing math, solving
problems, and using technology will find the doors of the 21st-
century workforce closed to them."

Time for the United States to Reskill? (OECD, 2013)

The Realities of the 21st Century Workforce

Perceived Wisdom

* The *fastest* growing occupations rely on technology and "21st
Century Skills"

The Realities of the 21st Century Workforce

Fastest growing occupations does not mean most

By 2018:

- Over 1/3 of 46.8 million job openings will require workers with high-school diploma or less
- 38% of all jobs will require a high-school diploma or less

(Help Wanted: Predictions of Jobs and Education Requirements Through 2018)

The Realities of the 21st Century Workforce

"Nationally, more than one in five jobs, or 22 percent, is in an occupation paying wages that fall below the federal poverty threshold. In eight states, more than one third of all jobs are in poverty-wage occupations."

"At the same time, the economy is comprised of a larger share of low-paying jobs, with an increase of 4.7 million jobs paying a poverty-level wage from 2002 to 2006."

(Working Hard, Still Falling Short)

The Realities of the 21st Century Workforce

Sec. 116. Performance accountability system. (b)(2)(A)(i)

- (I) The percentage of program participants who are in unsubsidized employment during the second quarter after exit from the program;
- (II) the percentage of program participants who are in unsubsidized employment during the fourth quarter after exit from the program;
- (III) the median earnings of program participants who are in unsubsidized employment during the second quarter after exit from the program;
- (IV) the percentage of program participants who obtain a recognized postsecondary credential, or a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent (subject to clause (iii)), during participation in or within 1 year after exit from the program;
- (V) the percentage of program participants who, during a program year, are in an education or training program that leads to a recognized postsecondary credential or employment and who are achieving measurable skill gains toward such a credential or employment; and
- (VI) the indicators of effectiveness in serving employers established pursuant to clause (iv).

The Realities of the 21st Century Workforce

(I) The percentage of program participants who are in unsubsidized employment during the second quarter after exit from the program;

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What kind of jobs are these?

(III) the median earnings of program participants who are in unsubsidized employment during the second quarter after exit from the program

What will this mean for program management?

The Realities of the 21st Century Economy

"The National Commission on Adult Literacy concludes that while *the nation's situation is one of grave urgency*, we have the power to reverse it. In *Reach Higher, America*, the Commission offers analysis and recommendations to do just that. While we rely on government to educate the population, other groups must get involved to regain our global leadership and retain our standard of living."

Reach Higher America (June 2008)

The Realities of the 21st Century Economy

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What happened that Fall and whose fault was it?

The Realities of the 21st Century Economy

- *Financialization*
 - The “Lehman Shock”
- *Globalization*
 - Race to the Bottom
 - Productivity as a Smokescreen

“States must invest in the skills of their workers so that increased productivity helps offset the effect of low-cost labor furnished by developing countries. Business must be an active partner in this effort.” (*Reach Higher America*, 2008)

 - Productivity in the United States is up
 - Corporate profits are up
 - Wages are stagnant
- *The “Natural” Rate of Unemployment*

The Realities of the 21st Century Economy

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Where are these jobs?

The larger economic system has a built-in ceiling for job placement

Levels of Education and Income

Median Income (New Jersey)

State:	\$42,725
Less than high school	\$21,462
High school (or equiv.)	\$31,408
Some college/AA	\$39,544
Bachelor	\$57,947
Graduate or professional degree	\$80,851

Levels of Education and Income

Below Poverty Level

% of those with Less than HS	19%
% of those with High School (or Equiv.)	10%
% of those with some college / AA	7%
% of those with Bachelor's or higher	3%

The Persistence of Poverty

- War on Poverty
 - 1972: 19.2% of the population lived in poverty
 - 1980: 19.5% of the population lived in poverty (Marsh, 2011)

- Workforce Investment Act
 - 1998: 12.7% of the population lived in poverty
 - 2012: 15% of the population lived in poverty

This suggests two things

- Workers moving up ladders are displacing other people
- Education alone will not be a way to move large numbers of poor adults out of poverty

Problem: Education as *the* Answer

- *Reach Higher America (NCAL, 2008)*
 - Problem: Individuals are not finding work
 - Proposal: Expand the WIA, refocus skills training to meet new needs
 - Alternative not presented: Create a jobs program

- *Building Career Ladders for the Working Poor Through Literacy Training (AIR, 2010)*
 - Problem: Individuals need to be making \$10.50/ hour to move beyond being working poor.
 - Proposal: Train individuals for jobs that pay \$10.50/hour
 - Alternative not presented: Suggest that other jobs pay a living wage

Problem: Education as *the* Answer

- This is not suggest education is not good or that we should not help people prepare for livelihoods (in addition to other humanistic goals for education) - Education is good, literacy is good, jobs are good.
- However, there are built-in limitations to what education alone can accomplish, and the focus on education as *the* answer -
 - Tends to place the blame for their status on poor individuals
 - Directs attention away from deeper seated structural problems with the economy
 - Limits discussion of other ways we can address poverty
 - May reroute support (money) to those already in a position to take advantage of it

Shifting the Discourse

Brookfield and Holst (2011) suggest the following ways that adult learning can be radicalized to service students. It should aim towards the following elements:

- Structuralized worldview
- Abstract conceptual reasoning
- Being uncoupled from “streams of cultural givens”
- Dialogic discussion

This is needed for the field, not just students.

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Your Thoughts

- Does this kind of structural analysis help?
- How would you do it with your students or your staff?
- How can we frame the argument for adult education, especially adult basic education, in a way that respects the full range of goals adults have and recognizes the reality of the current workforce environment?