

Issues and Perspectives

Adult Education in the Post-Secondary Context: Sustainability in the 21st Century

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The role of adult education is considered within the post-secondary context. In this paper, sustainability education, and particularly, the recent emergence globally of the United Nations University's Regional Centres of Expertise (RCEs) provides an example of how adult education may continue to serve in the 21st century, an era that has already proven itself in peril with issues of social and environmental justice—spanning wide ranging challenges of gender, race, and ecology.

Le rôle de l'éducation des adultes est étudié dans le contexte postsecondaire. Dans cet article, l'éducation au développement durable et notamment l'émergence récente sur l'échelle mondiale des Centres régionaux d'expertise de l'Université des Nations Unies, offre un exemple de la mesure dans laquelle l'éducation des adultes peut continuer à être utile au 21e siècle, époque qui s'est déjà avérée aux prises avec des problèmes de justice sociale et environnementale qui couvrent un vaste éventail de défis liés au genre, à la race et à l'écologie.

A few years ago, a colleague once described adult education as diverse and wide-ranging, unable to stake a special claim of its own within the academy. While this may be construed as an inherent weakness, diversity and a measured capacity to span a wide range of boundaries with other fields also represents a recognizable strength. In this short article, recent developments in sustainability education will be considered as an example of how adult education, as a field of study within the context of post-secondary education, could move forward in more connective ways within the academy, and beyond in partnership with communities and other organizations outside the post-secondary realm.

Taken within the post-secondary context, adult education as a field of study has faced several challenges, and yet has demonstrated an inherent capacity to redefine itself and stake its claim through new directions in programming and curricula. Notably, adult education programs at universities and community colleges across Canada have experienced declining enrolments and continued cutbacks in funding by provincial governments. As a result, at least in part, adult education departments have turned to more portable and intensive programs, especially at the graduate level, as an alternative to the fully-fledged Master's degree, with an emphasis on distance or online education with a practice-based focus that can be attained part-time and through shorter time frames of classroom instruction. Programs such as the Master's Certificate in Adult Training and Development at York University (2017), or the Adult Learning and

Education Diploma at the University of British Columbia (2017) meet these criteria. This trend toward professionally oriented programming in adult education is found further through the recent development of part-time cohort programs at the graduate level, given their appeal to working professionals (e.g., health care, social work, law enforcement) interested in enhancing their credentials typically in areas such as training and human resource development. At the University of Saskatchewan (2017), for example, a set of Master's degree cohort programs is offered in Indigenous education, land-based Indigenous education, critical environmental education, and lifelong learning. As adult education, the lifelong learning program is delivered through a course-based cohort requiring the usual 10 three-credit courses, designed to offer flexibility to part-time and off-campus students. The cohort model offers students a level of flexibility unknown through conventional on-campus programming, and may account in part for its recent popularity among adult education practitioners.

Sustainability in the Post-Secondary Context

Recent developments in sustainability education may offer adult educators within the post-secondary context a model, at least in part, for further direction in curricula and research with a decidedly interdisciplinary emphasis, yet with a focus on meaningful engagement with outlying communities and stakeholders. As a practice of environmental stewardship, sustainability has been around for millennia; and further, in the modern context through fisheries and forestry policy (Redclift, 2005). Not until the 1980s, however, did the term “sustainable development” find its way into the common vernacular when featured in the Brundtland Report as *Our Common Future* (World Commission on Environment and Development [WCED] 1987). The Brundtland Report was, in effect, a “political strategy of global environment and resource management ... an attempt to reconcile environmental problems with those of development” (Brand, 2012, p. 28), which provided the grounding essentially for the adoption of sustainability at the first Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, with its emphasis on ecological, economic and social sustainability. Yet central to sustainability is education. Sustainability education, as Robinson (2004) argues, should be understood principally as an integrative space for multiple points of view to come together instead of a single preconceived concept, such as an “education for” (e.g., education for peace, or education for environmental awareness), often accompanied by a pre-determined—and for many within the post-secondary context, the perception of a threatening, sometimes tiresome, yet marginalized—agenda (Jones, Selby, & Sterling, 2010; Wright & Wals, 2016). In this sense, de Andrade and Sorrentino (2014) add that, “the future should be seen in terms of social plurality, of diverse sustainable societies rather than only one sustainable development” (p. 152). This is a philosophical perspective that is amenable to the study (and practice) of adult education with its wide array of perspectives and interests.

The interdisciplinary approach to curricula and research lends itself well to a problem-posing inquiry (Freire, 1970), which in the framework of sustainability education, like adult education, requires multiple perspectives, “as no one discipline will suffice to capture social, cultural, regulatory, technological, scientific, economic and ecological dimensions of lived experience” (Stefanovic, 2008, p. 423). Whether through multidisciplinary (i.e., investigating educational phenomena from multiple disciplines), cross-disciplinary (i.e., an extension of one discipline into the area of another, as in business ethics), or perhaps transdisciplinarity (i.e., an application of perspectives across disciplines that transcends the disciplinary organization), an interdisciplinary approach to research and curriculum development places at premium the

importance of broad and diverse consultations (Esbjörn-Hargens, Reams, & Gunnlaugson, 2010; Stefanovic, 2008). Taken from an interdisciplinary point of view, curricula and research quickly become multidimensional as “we need to include the insights and truths from a myriad of perspectives as they all have something to offer a more complete understanding of any topic or phenomena” (Esbjörn-Hargens et al., 2010, p. 5). At Dalhousie University, for example, an interdisciplinary approach is taken to sustainability education, while delivered collaboratively by members of various faculties across the campus, including agriculture, arts and social sciences, computer science, engineering, health professions, management, medicine, and natural science. Significantly, this view of curricula (and research) offers a space for “students to understand the complex real world of sustainability problems from a variety of perspectives and conceptual frameworks” (Dalhousie University, 2017), in contrast to the traditional approach to education at universities, which “fragments and sectoralizes information so that one discipline has no understanding of its impact on the other” (Wright, 2010, p. 203); that is, “a student graduating with a business degree from the university might understand the financial benefits of oil extraction, but not the full environmental, political, and social ramifications and costs (and vice versa for a student in political science or biology)” (Wright, 2010, p. 203). In this sense, interdisciplinary education for sustainability takes on an enlarged perspective for bringing scholars and students together in “real world” problem solving.

Sustainability and Community Engagement

Sustainability education, as integrated and problem-based, took a favourable turn in 2002 when the World Summit for Sustainable Development in Johannesburg (10 years following the first Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro) revisited the need for a reorientation of education for sustainable development through the formal initiation and conceptual formation of Regional Centres of Expertise (RCEs; United Nations University [UNU], 2004). In effect, the establishment of RCEs served as the centerpiece of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD 2005-2014), with a focus on local action and expertise through 150 registered to-date, spanning the continents of the Americas, Europe, Australasia, Africa and the Middle-East (United Nations University [UNU-IAS], 2017). Taken within the realm of community-engaged programs of study, Regional Centres of Expertise offer a space for post-secondary education institutions to engage with outlying communities in addressing problems of immediate concern, described in this context as “a meeting point, a clearing- house, a knowledge broker, and a platform for information exchange and sharing” (Mochizuki & Fadeeva, 2008, p. 376). RCEs, then, offer a viable model for adult educators situated within a post-secondary context to engage with outlying communities through the development of research in areas of local interest.

The regional focus of Regional Centres of Expertise is perhaps where they can be potentially the most effective as a platform for research in bringing universities together, at a faculty level, with the interests, concerns, and problems of outlying communities. In this sense, RCEs lend themselves well within post-secondary education institutions as a means of bridging the gap between communities, governmental departments, businesses, and other organizations and stakeholders (Sedlacek, 2013); or as van Ginkel observes, “RCEs... create a natural framework for helping higher education institutions to break out of their normal confinement and play a positive, meaningful role in society” (as cited in Glasser, 2008, p. 115).

As illustrated in figure 1, Regional Centres of Expertise serve as networks for sustainability,

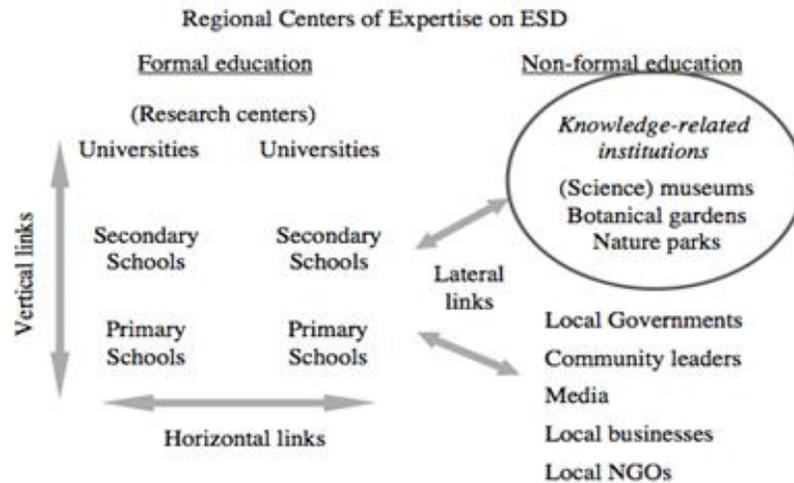


Figure 1. Conceptualization of RCEs (UNU, 2004)

and sustainability education, both vertically through formal education (e.g., post-secondary education, public schools) and research centres, yet also horizontally, or laterally, with a diverse network of non-formal education stakeholders, such as nature parks and eco-museums.

Across the globe, and especially in the Global South, RCEs have taken a concerted interest in contemporary social and environmental problems that include increased pressures from growing urban populations and industry on natural resources, such as fresh water; and further, extensive droughts and floods, which have caused major disruptions to local communities in regions through job losses, industry closures, infrastructure deterioration and added stress on already depleted health care services. In response, Regional Centres of Expertise have been engaged in developing sustainable livelihoods and social capacity at a community and regional level (see Fadeeva, Payyappallimana, & Petry, 2012) that have included locally-based sustainability educational initiatives. Through its partners, RCE Makana and Rural Eastern Cape (South Africa), for example, has set in motion an open Saturday Market that quickly became a popular place to purchase locally grown vegetables, bread, cheese and fish. Once a good customer base had been established, “the Environmental Learning Research Centre (ELRC), as an RCE partner, was invited to run workshops on local foods and simple change practices to enhance health and quality of life” (O’Donoghue, 2012, p. 32). The Saturday Market has begun to evolve, however, into a place for the deliberation of widening initiatives on local green production and consumption patterns; and significantly, while “much of this is amongst the elite and financially secure of the [Rhodes] university community ... some of the [RCE] student environment committees are taking up more and more in the way of expansive learning into the wider Makana community and partnering with unemployed youth and service organizations” (O’Donoghue, 2012, p. 32). This has become essentially a learning space in which adult educators situated within a post-secondary context may come together and engage potentially with colleagues of other fields of study, yet also with community members and non-formal educative organizations, for new research with a concerted focus on local problems of interest.

Conclusions

Adult education in the post-secondary context need not be confined to the academy. As Welton (1995) phrases it, adult education serves two masters, or two worlds—the worlds of instrumentality and social purpose. This perspective may encompass adult education’s continued and valued membership within the academy on one hand, and the world of action and advocacy on the other, reminiscent of influential adult educators of the 20th century, such as Moses Coady and Myles Horton, well known for their association respectively with the Antigonish Movement and the Hylander Folk School. As Freire (1970) had cautioned, however, one should not be without the other; that is, “if one is sacrificed—even in part—the other immediately suffers” (p. 87). In this paper, sustainability education through the United Nations University’s Regional Centres of Expertise has been given as one example of how adult education in the context of post-secondary education may continue to engage in praxis; thus, striking a balance between theory and practice, through its continued membership within the academy (which offers the benefits of interdisciplinarity in both the development of curricula and research), yet also through an action-oriented engagement with outlying communities. RCEs provide a venue for genuine engagement with a wide range of partners and communities, with a specific focus on problem-based research of local interest, including issues of social and environmental justice. In this sense, post-secondary education has a leading, transformative role to play in the 21st century, a role for which adult education is uniquely suited.

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