Engaging the Question of Adult Education

No good can come from avoiding the essential issue. There is a deep-seated conflict in this country concerning adult education and we may as well confront it. . . . There exists at present two schools of thought with respect to adult education. . . . The first, I shall call "mechanistic" and the second the "organic." . . . Those who represent the *mechanistic* viewpoint seem to believe that adult education . . . always means extending something which is already here. . . . The ideas with which they surround adult education are consequently quantitative, if not static in character. At best, such persons seem to think of adult education in naively instrumental terms. . . . On the other hand, those who hold the *organic* point of view assume at the outset that adult education . . . is not merely "more of the same"; that is, an extension of something which the privileged already enjoy, but rather a new quality and a new dimension in education . . . , a right, a normal expectancy, and not charity. Its purpose is to do something for adults which cannot be achieved by conventional education.

—Lindeman, 1938b, p. 49

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That the field of adult education is a contested terrain, a site of political struggle, was clear to Eduard Lindeman over half a century ago. That it remains so today is no longer readily apparent: an instrumental or "mechanistic" vision of adult education has come to dominate the field. I learned this quickly when I began my studies in adult and higher education. This instrumental understanding of adult education, however, contrasted starkly with the understanding that I brought to the field, an understanding tempered by my own experience as an adult learner. Unable to accommodate my direct experience within the field's vocation-centered, instrumental vision, I subsequently found myself driven to question its integrity.

Because I had returned to school after a number of years in the workforce as a tradesperson and union leader, not to amass more technical knowledge, further my administrative skills, or increase my earning power, but to pursue a general arts degree, I knew that not *all* adults construe education as an essentially vocational endeavor to be pursued in purely instrumental terms. As an adult learner, I had looked to education to broaden my understanding, not to better equip me for the marketplace. When, as an undergraduate, I switched first from psychology to English, and then from English to philosophy, I had done so *not* to increase my chances of employment, but to accommodate my changing interests. While my motives for changing programs seemed perfectly rational to me, when I tried to defend them to former workmates or fellow students, I quickly learned that, for many of them, rationality correlated directly with employability, not interest. I was one of a shrinking few, it seemed, who considered education an end in itself, rather than a means to an end—employment. While the issue of employability had always been a matter of concern to me, contributing, for instance, to my decision to investigate and pursue graduate studies in adult and higher education, it had never been my prime concern.

In fact, after completing an honors degree in philosophy, I had decided to pursue a master's degree in the same discipline, reasoning that if all went well, there was a good chance that I might enter a doctoral program in the future. After one semester, however, my situation changed, and the possibility of studying beyond the master's level began to look remote. My situation was such that I had to suspend my studies, and this allowed me, among other things, time to investigate my options. At this point, I have to admit that I stumbled on adult edu-

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cation quite inadvertently—a career in the education of adults being something that simply had not occurred to me. I was immediately intrigued by the prospect, however, recalling that I had presented a number of workshops and training programs to adults as a union leader and that I had instructed a number of adult apprentices as a journeyperson. Moreover, as president of my local union, I had served as a trustee and chairperson of an education training fund for a number of years. I excitedly discussed this new option with Gail, my wife—without whose support, both emotional and financial, my sojourn into academia would have been impossible—and subsequently made the decision to apply for admission into the graduate program in adult and higher education.

After my application for admission proved successful, I entered my new field of study eager to supplement my rudimentary knowledge of adult education. But the modern practice of adult education, I quickly learned, did not reflect my own lived experience as an adult learner; moreover, it took for granted much that I, as a student of the humanities, had learned to question. I began, therefore, investigating alternative visions of adult education, only to learn that a number of adult educators shared my concerns and were involved in an ongoing struggle to reconceptualize the field's "mechanistic" vision of adult education. I also learned that an "organic" vision of adult education had once rivalled the instrumental perspective that dominates the field today, and that Eduard Lindeman, over fifty years ago, had articulated a vision of adult education that not only accommodated my experience as an adult learner but also echoed many of my concerns regarding the modern practice of adult education. Lindeman, I learned, had staunchly opposed those who sought to reduce adult education to a range of "mechanistic" practices, absolutely refusing to view it as a vocational enterprise to be pursued in purely instrumental terms. Lindeman's was a vision of adult education that resonated with my own.

For Lindeman (1935b), adult education is "a social process . . . , not . . . a simple device whereby knowledge is transferred from one mind to another" (p. 45). Its "primary goal is not vocational. Its aim is not to teach people how to make a living but rather how to live. It offers no ulterior reward. . . . Life is its fundamental subject matter" (1929, p. 37). Adult education, he argues, is "social education for purposes of social change . . . , an instrument designed to shorten the 'cultural lag' . . . in

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a democratic society" (1945a, pp. 116–117), "a mode of social adaption . . . ; the answer to blind prejudice and demagoguery" (1944c, p. 102). It is "not merely . . . a means for increasing the efficiency or the smartness of a few selected individuals," but rather "an instrument for social change" (1938b, p. 51), "a cultural adventure aiming at freedom through intelligence" (1949, p. 179), an endeavor that "begins where vocational education leaves off. Its purpose is to put meaning into the whole of life" (1961, p. 5). Against those who promote it as simply "a matter of adapting individuals to existing cultural norms," Lindeman argues that adult education, "on the contrary, . . . is definitely futuristic, in movement towards coming adjustments" (1944c, p. 94). It is an indispensable way "of shortening our cultural lag," of bridging "the distance between our technological advances and our cultural values" (1944d, p. 111), of ensuring the continuation of freedom and democracy in our modern age.

An avid student of history, Lindeman (1937, pp. 75–76) knew from ages past that "when the distance between life as action and life as reflection becomes so great that experience loses its organic wholeness societies begin to disintegrate." He also knew that "unhappily, we live in such an age," recognizing that "we . . . have lost the essential connection between our vast technological equipment and the sense of human value. Our civilization has outrun our culture; our means have become inconsistent with our ends." In such times, Lindeman contends—times characterized by a growing "discrepancy between the two major departments of experience, namely the outer, external, objective aspects of life, and the inner, psychological, subjective processes by means of which experience is evaluated"—democratic societies are faced with a major challenge: "to discover sanctions for peace and order other than violence." This challenge, Lindeman argues, can only be met through adult education. There is "no other alternative," he contends: "the equation ends with experimental social education," with adult education that "consists of *increased awareness of the self and of other selves, directed toward social justice*."

Convinced that "social justice cannot be achieved through the learning of children and youth," since "the young make their adaptions to an adult-controlled world," Lindeman (1937, pp. 76–77) maintains that adult education is the only "instrument of action" that can establish a just social order. Adults, he contends, *must* "change while education

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for the young is being improved"; otherwise, "we become entangled in a vicious circle." Adult education, therefore, "is not only merely education of adults; adult education is learning associated with social purposes"—its "complete objective is to synchronize the democratic and the learning processes"; it is "the operating alternative for dominance, dictatorship, and violence." In adult education, "the adult learner," Lindeman argues, "is not merely engaged in the pursuit of knowledge" but is "experimenting with himself," is "testing his incentives in the light of knowledge," is, "in short, changing his habits, learning to live on behalf of new motivations." While today, Lindeman's exclusionary pronouns cry out to be replaced with more inclusionary terms, this should not distract us from the importance of his message: adult education is a distinctively social endeavor.

Lindeman, in fact, dismisses "mechanistic" adult education as ingenuous for this very reason, cautioning his fellow Americans that "if it turns out to be impossible to induce considerable numbers of American adults to subject themselves to a learning procedure which is social in its aims as well as its methods, our society will be remade by force and violence." Against those who argue that "in an age of increasing tensions . . . the function of education is to ease and relieve those tensions," Lindeman (1944d, pp. 105–106) contends that "it is the function of education to understand the ideas and the needs which have precipitated the tensions," that "each tension is . . . an educational opportunity," and that "to evade social tensions is to invite trouble." Conceptions of adult education that fail to recognize its irremediably social nature, Lindeman (1944d, p. 101) argues, are intrinsically flawed, convinced that "the purpose of adult education is to prevent intellectual statics; the arrested development of individuals who have been partially educated cannot be prevented otherwise." Proponents of "mechanistic" adult education, of educational practices that encourage individuals to act "on behalf of goals and purposes with which they have had nothing to do," Lindeman (1938a, p. 147) warns, are courting disaster. Adult education, like democracy, Lindeman (1938a, p. 151) maintains, "is neither a goal nor a mechanical device for attaining a preconceived goal. It is at bottom a mode of life founded upon the assumption that goals and methods, means and ends, must be compatible and complementary." To separate means from ends, facts from values, Lindeman (1944a, p. 160) warns, is to forget that "the ends . . . 'pre-exist in the

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means'," that "we become what we do, not what we wish." To "violate this principle," to succumb to "the doctrine that the end justifies the means," is to abandon our "democratic faith" and be left standing "on dubious moral ground."

In the preface to *Learning Democracy*, Stephen Brookfield (1987) notes of Lindeman that "throughout his life he argued against the dangers of over-specialization of functions and interests, which he saw as perhaps the single most distressing consequence of the technological changes of the twentieth century." He was convinced that "specialization produced truncated, inchoate individuals, whose lives were characterized by a schizophrenic split between personal concerns and broader social movements." While recognizing that "we are committed . . . to the process of division of labor, to specialism," Lindeman (1961, pp. 81–84) rails against "experts and specialists whose functions become external to the people whom they serve," identifying them as "miseducated . . . 'particularists' . . . who behave as if 'one phase of the process' were 'the source of all others'." Their "educative contact," he contends, "is forever education in a false direction," for "the specialist who becomes protagonist for a particularist point of view has already deserted the spirit of science" and "labors under the 'illusion of centrality' which keeps him and his disciples from recognizing 'that the life process is an evolving whole of mutually interacting parts, any of which is effect as well as cause'." While cognizant of the tantalizing allure of instrumental education to those enamored with the twin goals of technological and economic "progress," Lindeman (1961, p. 49) relentlessly challenges their construal of adult education as simply another means of producing the army of specialists that "progress" demands. Fearing that they "may . . . so far exaggerate the incentives and motives which are derived from capitalism and profit production as to cause the entire educational system to become a direct response to this system and to lead to its further emphasis," Lindeman warns that if this emergent "system, both on its economic and educational sides, becomes too rigid and too oppressive and incapable of sincere self-criticism, nothing short of violent revolution will suffice to change its direction." For this very reason, Lindeman rejects as inherently dangerous the view that adult educators need only be technicians skilled in the science of learning.

Lindeman, Brookfield (1987, pp. 12–13) notes, recommends that adult educators be schooled not only in motivational and developmental

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psychology but also in "cultural history, since motives for learning are affected by the intellectual climate of an era, which is itself related intimately to contemporary social movements." They should "be capable of understanding the work experience of their students" and "be equipped to interpret and build on the inter- and intra-relationship of various disciplines of knowledge"; they should not be specialists in one area of knowledge: "a liberal grasp of a wide range of subject areas and interpretive frameworks was necessary to a good teacher of adults." Adult education, Lindeman (1929b, p. 23) argues, "is not a process of acquiring the tools of learning . . . , but rather a way of learning the relation between knowledge and living. Adult education is functional in the sense that its aim is to serve individual and group adjustment, but it is non-vocational." It "begins not with subject-matter but with the situations and experiences which mold adult life." It is "a method whereby the experiences and ideologies of adults are freed from traditional bonds." Consequently,

> during the years when Thorndike, Lorge and others were assessing the physiological and psychological bases for *excellent* adult learning, Lindeman was describing the special character and the depth of mature learning. He did not look upon learning merely as some kind of social *governor* or control: primarily it was itself dynamic; essentially it meant change and growth. (Kidd, 1961, p. xvii)

Unswerving in his insistence that it not be (mis)construed as a purely instrumental practice that serves simply to bolster and legitimate the existing social order, Lindeman maintains that adult education can be understood properly only as

> a co-operative venture in non-authoritarian, informal learning the chief purpose of which is to discover the meaning of experience; a quest of the mind which digs down to the roots of the preconceptions which formulate our conduct; a technique of learning for adults which makes education coterminous with life, and hence elevates living itself to the level of an experiment. (Lindeman, 1925, cited in Stewart, 1984, p. 1)

Consequently, "to Lindeman the current interest in adult education using distance teaching methods and educational broadcasting," not to mention "individual computer usage, would have been not only inex-

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plicable but also a contradiction in terms" (Brookfield, 1987, p. 5). Lindeman, Brookfield suggests, would have scorned such activities "as mass instruction or programmed instruction," as practices devoid of "the collaborative articulation and interpretation of experience claimed by him as the quintessential adult educational activity." Despite all claims to the contrary, then, Lindeman (1945a, p. 117) refuses to believe that adult educators can abrogate their moral responsibility and pursue their enterprise in a purely instrumental manner, convinced that she or "he who deals with the needs of life plunges into that icy pool which so many would like to avoid, the name of which is morality."

It was, then, somewhat of a relief, after spending several months learning that university courses in adult and higher education were courses concerned almost exclusively with questions of technique, to find in Lindeman confirmation of my own experience and concerns as an adult learner. For, by that time, I had learned that my unease with the dominant vision of adult education was something neither faculty nor my fellow students shared. Expediency, I had learned, was the order of the day: to spend time debating whether a certain course of action *should* be pursued or not was considered a waste of time. After all, institutions or employers made those sorts of "messy" political decisions. Adult educators need only concern themselves with *how* adults learn, not *why*. The modern practice of adult education, I had been assured, is a scientific enterprise, an endeavor untainted by moral and political imperatives. Value judgments, questions of intrinsic worth, notions of the common good are metaphysical (my word, not theirs) issues, I had been told, theoretical concerns that are of little consequence to a field of study committed to the "practical" dimension of life.[1]

But while I gained some solace in reading Lindeman, I also came to realize that to replace adult education's obsessive preoccupation with *how* adults learn with a genuine concern for *what* they should learn would require more than a rebuttal of its scientific underpinnings. For while the conflict Lindeman identified in adult education fifty-five years ago remains unresolved to this day, there is a major difference between the modern practice of adult education and the nascent field of practice Lindeman described: the "mechanistic" school of thought has come to dominate the field to such an extent that all "organic" visions of adult education have been relegated to the margins. The instrumental perspective that now informs the modern practice of adult education has become so

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entrenched in modern consciousness that its reified concepts now appear sacrosanct. The commonsense assumption that the modern practice of adult education is a disinterested, *scientific* endeavor that need not, indeed, *should not* concern itself with moral and political questions has become all but impossible to question because the field's normative base can no longer be addressed within its narrowly defined, depoliticized, dehistoricized, technicist, professional discourse.

With these factors in mind, I realized that any convincing critique of the modern practice of adult education would have to do more than undermine the world view that informs the field's technicist, professionalized discourse; it would have to identify the factors, the forces, and the conditions that prompt adult educators and adult learners to accept an instrumental vision of adult education, even though to do so is to abandon the ideals of democracy and submit to a growing loss of personal freedom. In an address to a gathering of adult educators, Lindeman (1938b, p. 49) suggested that the increasing acceptance of "mechanistic" adult education may be attributable to a failure, on the part of adult educators, to clearly articulate the "organic" nature and social purpose of their endeavor:

> it seems inescapably clear that people do not know what we mean by adult education. Their confusion does not derive from lack of awareness that adults are capable of study; what they do not fully and clearly comprehend is why adults *should* study. As adult educators we have not been clear in our own minds, and consequently the situation with respect to motivation for adult learning is one of muddled confusion.

Yet while Lindeman is willing to entertain the idea that "perhaps we have all along been using the wrong word," recognizing that "adult education is a prosaic term which seems to place emphasis upon genetics rather than upon educational aims," he notes that, ultimately, "the word itself cannot possibly be our main difficulty because language, being always responsive to changing meanings, is flexible and we can make the term mean whatever we choose." He concludes, therefore, that "the real difficulty lies deeper than the mere use of words." Brookfield (1987) offers an indication of just how much deeper this difficulty lies.

A number of commentators, Brookfield (1987, p. 196) notes, have attempted to draw attention to the "lack of discourse among adult edu-

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cators of the important social and political issues of the day." He notes, however, that "part of the reason for this silence was the manner by which adult educators adopted an adaptive rationale—'to let arrangements replace goals . . . '—in their programming activities." Adult educators, Brookfield contends, "under the pressure of producing a self-financing program . . . , fell foul all too often to the temptation of allowing the criteria of increased enrollments and revenues to determine the direction of their efforts." The "deeper difficulty," then, seems to be that adult educators, isolated within the confines of the field's depoliticized, decontextualized, instrumental discourse, have lost sight of the political and economic factors that are determining the fate of their enterprise. Any convincing critique of the modern practice of adult education, it seemed to me, then, would have to address not only this "deeper difficulty" but also *why* some adult educators feel justified, and others even compelled, to relinquish their moral responsibility. Simply to demonstrate that instrumental adult education is not a purely disinterested scientific endeavor but rather a value-laden, political practice that serves to perpetuate the status quo, would do little to change the minds of those who embrace the modern practice of adult education. A much more persuasive critique would be one that revealed the intrinsically social nature and moral underpinnings of the technicist world view, a critique that identified not only how the forces and conditions that now serve to mystify those underpinnings came into being but also why they continue to exist.

My hope is that the research undertaken herein will contribute to the development of just such a persuasive critique of the modern practice of adult education. However, it remains highly unlikely that critique, alone, no matter how persuasive or how well substantiated, will ever be sufficient to displace the field's deeply entrenched technicist ideas, ideas that arose from, and continue to be supported by, very real material conditions. While critical reflection may provide an incentive to question prevailing practices, there is much to suggest that the ideas that inform those practices, once reified, can be overturned only when the social forms that support them are changed. This means that alternative adult education practices—democratic and emancipatory forms of adult education that embody the ideals they promote, for instance—must emerge to engender and support the ideas that inform them *before* any real possibility of displacing the field's reified, technicist ideas will

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present itself. The critique presented, herein, is more a justification to pursue alternative adult education practices, then, than an argument to change minds. There are, of course, very real problems associated with putting democratic and emancipatory ideals into practice in the classroom, but these problems must be addressed if any real changes are to occur.

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