

WHY ADULTS LEARN

Towards a Theory of Participation in
Adult Education

Sean Courtney

ROUTLEDGE LIBRARY EDITIONS:
ADULT EDUCATION



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Volume 4

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First published in 1992 by Routledge

This edition first published in 2019

by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge

52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-138-32224-0 (Set)

ISBN: 978-0-429-43000-8 (Set) (ebk)

ISBN: 978-1-138-35066-3 (Volume 4) (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-429-43575-1 (Volume 4) (ebk)

Publisher's Note

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Sean Courtney



London and New York

First published 1992 by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
a division of Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc.
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

© 1992 Sean Courtney

Typeset in Times by LaserScript Limited, Mitcham, Surrey
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Biddles Ltd, Guildford and King's Lynn

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Courtney, Sean

Why adults learn: towards a theory of participation in adult education (Theory
and practice of adult education in North America)

1. Mature students. Motivation

I. Title II. Series

374.181

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Courtney, Sean, 1948-

Why adults learn: towards a theory of participation in adult education/Sean
Courtney

p. cm. – (Routledge series on theory and practice of adult education in North
America)

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

1. Adult education – Social aspects – United States.

2. Community and school – United States. 3. Adult education – Psychological
aspects – United States. I. Title. II. Series: Theory and practice
of adult education in North America series.

LC5225.S64C68 1991

374'.973–dc20

91-10116

CIP

ISBN 0-415-02480-3

**This book is dedicated
to the memory of my parents**

**Eileen O'Shea
and
John Courtney**



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Preface

For a number of reasons the subject of adults and their learning has become a modern focus of concern in the United States, as well as elsewhere in the industrialized world. For example, since the Second World War, the population of this country has been aging. In 1900, about 4 per cent were 65 and over. By 1975, this proportion had risen to 10 per cent and represented some 22 million persons. By the year 2000, if present trends continue, approximately 31 million people will be in that age category, constituting almost 12 per cent of the American population. This phenomenon, sometimes referred to as the 'graying' of the United States, has made medical care and the plight of the elderly major issues for political parties as well as agencies who deliver social services.

Less noticed, among the many dramatic statistics on this sector of the population and its general demography, is the fact that those over 50 currently enjoy better health and a higher level of educational attainment than their cohorts of any previous generation. They live longer, retire earlier and have more leisure time to enjoy. They have the background and, in many cases, the resources to return to the world of education, to take up school or college where they once left off, or simply to begin to explore the world of learning as they have never had the opportunity or leisure to do before.

Concern for older adults and their well-being is but one example of an ever-broadening concern with social change in the United States and how to deal with it. A report on the Lifelong Learning Act (sometimes referred to as the Mondale Act), which became law in 1976 but for which money was never appropriated, discusses other groups besides the aging who require special attention from law-makers and educators because of their size and special needs. These groups include women, workers and urban youth.

Women are turning up with increasing frequency in the workforce, are sharing in occupations traditionally reserved for men or are being

compelled to earn a pay-check to produce or supplement the family income. Continuing education has figured strongly in this movement, which, since the 1950s, has taken on the force and ideology of a revolution. The United States is also entering what is being called a 'post- industrial' phase, whose symptoms include the disappearance of heavy manufacturing, the rise of the service sector and a tremendous emphasis, in theory at least, on information and language as key elements of the new workworld. Where once, we are told, brute strength and a native cunning might have been sufficient to secure a fortune, now it is education and an ability to deal with the world of 'high' literacy which stand between men and women and their shot at the American Dream.

It often appears that the kind of educational diet fed to young people will suffice for older clients, because the need is great and the 'pupils' are willing. But what of those whose rate of drop-out and record of poor discipline is giving compulsory schooling its greatest headache since it first began to be implemented at the close of the nineteenth century? What of the failure of traditional schooling to reach urban youth, those of black, white and Hispanic origin who often come from or head up one-parent families, are the victims of gangs and drugs, and who are most likely to lead a life umbilically linked to welfare? How are they to be reached by traditional educational means? And if not, what are their chances of success?

Profound social and economic changes, many predating the Second World War, have thus combined to bring to the front of stage the concept of 'lifelong learning.' Defined in many different ways, depending on context and author, at the very least it means the opening up of educational institutions to those traditionally deprived of the opportunity. Hence, the emphasis on women and workers as learners. But much more is at issue here than the extension of traditional schooling to non-traditional populations. The failure to staunch the flow of drop-outs and 'stay-outs' has required that educators and policy-makers rethink the meaning of education, the purpose of schooling and the place of learning in our everyday lives. Hence, the concept of lifelong learning has also implied a reinterpretation of the question of needs and who is being served by traditional institutions, the relationship between teacher and student, the nature of the curriculum and even the very ways in which knowledge itself is discovered, organized and taught.

For the foreseeable future, education will be tied closely to people's perceptions of social and occupational mobility. As long as these perceptions remain, then the United States will remain a country where demand churns up the tide of supply. Adult education has become a part of that vast ebb and flow wherein people's dreams are tested and reformed. To understand then the whole phenomenon of adult learning in the United

States it appears necessary to understand the nature of the motivation that moves men and women to return to school or otherwise embrace educational endeavors, often many years after they have left the classroom far behind. Such an understanding would be incomplete, however, without a similar effort to comprehend the context within which men's and women's motives play out their ritual tattoo. For adult learning is as much a phenomenon of a society and how it defines itself and its destiny as it is a function of individual men and women and their efforts to interpret that destiny in their own terms. Adult learning rests on individual interest and initiative. It also emerges from a particular kind of society at a particular moment in its history. These essentially are the themes of the present work.

This is primarily an attempt to bring to the attention of adult educators and researchers alike the fruits of research on a subject that many would judge to be central to the adult education enterprise in this country: voluntary participation in organized learning activities by the adult population and the reasons for it. Participation is probably the most researched subject in the literature of adult education and has had a long pedigree, as Chapter 1 attempts to demonstrate. Indeed, surveys of adult learners within a broad empirical-positivist or policy-oriented framework are still, probably, the most frequent form that research in adult education takes, as Chapter 2 reveals.

However, theoretical attempts to explain participation have been much less plentiful, until recently. Moreover, that body of literature is at best fragmented and suffers from an ahistoricism which has condemned much that was of value to oblivion, leaving in its place isolated studies bereft of the big picture. The present work is an attempt at the big picture. Building a systematic picture of adult learning in the United States and the factors responsible for it has meant also restoring a balance which may once have existed but has now almost certainly been lost. By that I mean that most modern research on adult learning and its causes is by and large psychological in tone and tendency and fails to do justice to the environment or social context in which the activity under scrutiny takes place. Hence my interest in the concept of social participation and its implications for a reinterpretation of adult learning as an aspect of the person's totality of involvement with his or her community and society.

The strengths and weaknesses of the psychological paradigm are examined in Chapters 3 and 4. In the latter also the transition is made away from learning as intrinsically psychobiological in nature and towards a view of it as a species of socially significant and normative action. In Chapter 5 the implications of this view are developed through a study of the concept of social participation, especially as that relates to two of the more significant dimensions of that concept: membership in voluntary

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associations and the uses of leisure. Chapter 6 extends this interpretation by examining adult education in the context of society at large and its major functions, which include the survival of its culture and the promotion of order among its citizens, an order to which education contributes by aiding in the process of socialization. Finally, in Chapter 7, major themes are restated and the issue of participation and adult learning are briefly discussed within the context of American educational history at large.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Since this book has been a long time in the making there are many whom I would like to acknowledge for their help at different stages in the process. In Northern Ireland I found a necessary source of inspiration in the writings and friendship of Tom Lovett on behalf of 'radical' adult education and in the tireless self-sacrifice of Frank D'Arcy on behalf of adult students. Phyllis Cunningham and John Niemi were important mentors at Northern Illinois University when the work in Ireland evolved into a dissertation. To Phyllis, in particular, I owe a special debt of gratitude for her openness, unflinching integrity and infectious excitement about this strange hybrid we call adult education. My interest in and commitment to adult education, especially as expressed in this book, has been deepened and expanded by the friendship and collegueship of peers, among them: Roger Boshier, Steve Brookfield, the late Dave Castellanos, Michael Collins, Sue Davenport, David Little, Fred Schied, Bob Smith, Harold Stubblefield, Charlene Sexton and John Dirkx. A special thanks to Harold Stubblefield for agreeing to read and comment on the final manuscript. Finally, I am indebted to my wife, Audrie Berman, whose six 'letters' of advice I have tried, not always successfully, to follow: 'BB BC BD' (Be brief, be clear and be done).

Sean Courtney
Nebraska

1 Explaining participation in American adult education

Research on elementary and secondary education has largely ignored the topic [of participation] and in the higher education arena it has seldom been considered of major importance. Yet participation is central to theory and practice in adult education because the great majority of adults are voluntary learners.

(Darkenwald and Merriam, 1982)

Between work and sleep, labor and love, men and women carve out for themselves moments of leisure – discretionary slots – in which they engage in a variety of activities of greater or lesser meaning, more or less fulfillment. They participate in politics, join and become active in clubs, knock a ball around a field, or simply sit in the pleasant tribal gloom of the movie-house, eager for an hour or two to escape the human condition. They spend a third of their day, free enterprise notwithstanding, expending energy in the service of others. They may spend a third sleeping. Into the remaining third they cram all the rest: love-making, eating, visiting friends, watching television, pounding on a hobby in the basement, walking for health, helping elect reactionary politicians, writing letters, and so on.

Among this motley collection falls an activity which seems at times to belong more to the realm of labor than of leisure, of work than of play. Often thought of as an activity in its own right, it may also appear as a perspective on some other activity, a ghost of purpose hovering about that which is being pursued for its own ends. For the most part, however, in an age with its penchant for the visible, it is something which has been detached from the flux and thrust into a realm of its own, with a sign hung over its head and a label on its chest. It is adult education. And it reflects the behavior of millions of men and women on the American continent busy in the business of life, now laboring, now loving, and, in between bites, now learning.

In 1989, approximately 25 million Americans will have taken part in

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some form of organized learning activity.¹ This constitutes about 14 per cent of the total adult population of the country. In 1984, the last year for which we have up-to-date figures, the figure was 23 million. By 1990, other things being equal, the percentage will increase slightly to 15 per cent. While these numbers suggest a leveling off in the total participant population since the beginning of the 1980s, they remain impressive by any measure. Moreover, this species of voluntary, social action appears to have dramatically increased in recent years. Between 1969 and 1984, the overall adult population, meaning those aged 17 and over, increased by about 27 per cent. The proportion of those participating in adult education, however, increased by 63 per cent, more than twice the rate for the adult population as a whole. That is indeed impressive. It means that for millions of American men and women, deliberate and planned learning is a significant factor in their lives.

And this may not be the whole story. Some independent surveys have put the real number of adult learners as high as 35 per cent (Carp, Petersen and Roelfs, 1974) or even 50 per cent (Aslanian and Brickell, 1980) of the adult population, while there are some researchers, following the line of inquiry initiated by Allen Tough, who have pegged the number even higher. For example, a national survey conducted by Patrick Penland in the mid-1970s estimated that

about 80 per cent of the American population 18 years and older perceive themselves to be continuing learners, . . . [while] over 3/4 of the U.S. population . . . had planned one or more learning projects on their own in the year before . . . the data were collected. (Penland, 1979, p. 173)

Whether attending classes in schools and community colleges, sending away for correspondence packages, or doing on-the-job training, Americans are engaging in behaviors many of which are universal in nature; others are quintessentially their own. They are attempting to learn a language with headphones and a cassette, how to repair a car armed with 'power' tools and the latest five-hundred-page manual. A man about to retire is reading all he can on the subject 'Is there life after work?' A woman returns to college to earn a degree now that her children are all grown up and moved away. From birthing to 'deathing,' in the popular and scientific literature, this unending variety of classes, encounter groups, and self-directed, self-improvement projects constitutes the phenomenon of mass, adult education, perhaps one of the most popular forms of recreation on the North American continent. What was once the domain of the few today constitutes, or so it seems, a genuine 'Learning Society.'²

There can be no doubting a new awareness about the nature and

pervasiveness of adult education in American society. While traditionally, education has been identified with schooling and with all that takes place roughly between the ages of 5 and 20, there is now a growing sense that schooling, even where successful, is but half of the total picture and that learning itself is a much more varied, boundary-crossing, unplanned, spontaneous, problem-specific, need-driven phenomenon than was formerly thought.³

The purpose of this book is to construct an explanation of why this is happening. Why do adults continue to learn after they have escaped the chalky ennui of the classroom? What motivates them to return? What are their goals and how do they achieve them? Why do some seem such eager learners while others, who are similar to them in many ways, seem not to care? What, more generally, accounts for the variety of educational opportunity in the United States? Why do adults learn?

THE PROBLEM OF PARTICIPATION

For most of us, whether administrators of programs, teachers of adults, or program planners, these questions and the possible answers they generate seem relatively straightforward and uncomplicated. Survey research has provided the following list. There is the need to acquire basic information and apply it in one's daily life, the desire to advance professionally, or the need to increase efficiency at work. People learn for cultural enjoyment, to become more useful in the community, because friends or family urge one to get involved, out of boredom and the desire for the company of like-minded people, because they like a particular subject matter or enjoy a particular hobby, and so forth. To change, to gain confidence, to meet everyday challenges – these and many more litter the stage on which the question of motivation is raised.

In our everyday lives we witness the vitality of people in the pursuit of knowledge and greater skills. We encounter many who find it natural to continue the life of learning from school into adulthood. We encounter many others who were not motivated by school, but who decide to return to the scene of earlier disappointments only because they have been persuaded that without it, without a 'sheepskin,' survival in today's advanced 'post-industrial' age will be difficult. For we have been told by politicians and religious leaders that change is the order of the day and that further education is needed to cope with, understand and indeed embrace change. We have the witness of our own eyes and ears when we read of the inexorable demise of the great dinosaurs which once made America great: the steel foundries of US Steel and Republic lying dead along the shores of South Chicago and the Monongahela River in Ohio. Only retraining can

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help the unemployed of these companies to go forward into the next age. Even without the competition from Japan and South Korea, the accelerated march of technology is creating new jobs, at the same time rendering whole occupational categories obsolete. So the need is there, apparently, and the opportunities also, apparently, are there: plenty of community colleges, classes run by schools and universities, programs for retraining skilled manual workers at one end of the status continuum, and programs of continuing professional education to update current skills and knowledge at the other end.

Two assumptions underlie this somewhat idealized scenario. According to the first, those responsible for organizing educational opportunities for adults will assume that wherever educational needs exist they are being fulfilled or shortly will be. According to the second, there is a fairly direct line from the 'felt' need to its fulfillment, from the person's believing he or she ought to learn more to his or her actually engaging in various types of goal-related activities. Both assumptions may be wrong, and it is the way in which they may be wrong that gives this study its rationale.

Adult education as a response to personal and social needs

Since researchers first began to survey the phenomenon of participation in adult education (PAE) back in the late 1920s (Marsh, 1926; Lorimer, 1931), they have been uncovering basically the same findings time and time again. Despite the apparent need, in the quick-silver environment of job change and obsolescence, for new skills and new knowledge and despite the apparent willingness of American postsecondary institutions to respond to this apparent demand, there are fewer participants than nonparticipants in organized learning programs, fewer learners, apparently, than non-learners. Moreover, those who do participate are in precise ways distinct from those who do not.

Organized adult education in the United States is essentially the social domain of white, middle-class American men and women who are relatively well-educated and young. What was true over twenty years ago when Johnstone and Rivera (1965) constructed their now famous and much-quoted profile of the 'average' participant, and what was certainly true before that time, remains the case today:

The participant is just as often a woman as a man, is typically under 40, has completed high school or better, enjoys an above-average income, works full-time and in a white-collar occupation, is white, Protestant, married and has children, lives in an urbanized area (more likely the suburbs than the city), and is found in all parts of the country, but more