The Profession and Practice of Adult Education
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The Jossey-Bass
Higher and Adult Education Series

Consulting Editor
Adult and Continuing Education
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Preface

Adult educators are everywhere—in the community, in the workplace, on farms, and in hospitals, prisons, libraries, colleges, and universities. They plan and administer programs, and they counsel and facilitate learning in subjects as diverse as ceramics, computer training, nutrition, job skills, literacy, continuing medical education, and environmental awareness. The growing visibility of adults engaging in education (reflected in movies, news stories, and television shows), however, is offset by the fact that many educators of adults remain unaware that they are part of a cadre of thousands that constitutes the field of adult education. This book is meant to broadly outline this professional field of practice.

Nearly fifteen years ago, Sharan Merriam published a coauthored book on the foundations of the field of adult education (Darkenwald and Merriam, 1982). That book, and the later edited Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education (Merriam and Cunningham, 1989), have been the only major sources providing comprehensive overviews of the field.

On the doorstep of the twenty-first century, we believe that the timing is right for an updated introductory text on adult education. The Profession and Practice of Adult Education: An Introduction describes and interprets the broad and rapidly developing field of study and practice. It is something of a “snapshot” of adult education in North America at this point in time.
As with any introductory text, we have had to make choices about what to include and what to emphasize. This is not a book about how to plan programs or teach adults; instead, it is about what constitutes professional practice. It is not our intent to give detailed scenarios about specific practices or individual practitioners, but rather to frame information by providing a conceptual map of the field. And while we attend to international, community-based, non-formal, and informal adult education in various chapters, the emphasis is on North American adult education, as well as formal, organized delivery systems.

Audience

The major audience for *The Profession and Practice of Adult Education: An Introduction* will be practitioners working in adult education in various capacities and in a multitude of settings. Some of these practitioners will also be graduate students enrolled in more than a hundred North American master’s and doctoral degree programs. In these graduate programs, an introductory course often affords students the first realization that they are part of a larger community of adult educators who have much in common; such a course is thus an important socializing mechanism for building the field of adult education while providing a base for other courses in the curriculum.

Other practitioners who discover that they are involved in adult education, and who are interested in becoming better acquainted with the field, will also find this book helpful in gaining a basic understanding of adult education.

Finally, our experience with past introductory texts would suggest that practitioners and students in other countries will also make use of this text.

Overview of the Contents

*The Profession and Practice of Adult Education: An Introduction* is designed to (1) provide a descriptive overview of major dimensions of the adult education field, and (2) raise awareness of the critical
issues and tensions inherent in the practice of adult education. We anticipate that many readers are knowledgeable about their particular aspect of practice but new to adult education as a whole. Acquiring a basic understanding of the entire field—a map of the territory—is a necessary first step to situate one’s own base of practice within a larger framework. Hence, eight of the book’s eleven chapters are primarily descriptive.

With regard to the second goal of raising awareness of the critical issues, three chapters specifically examine issues and tensions of the field. Rather than being grouped at the end of the book, these three chapters are strategically placed to focus on the topics of those chapters immediately preceding them, and they attempt to help you stand back to critically assess issues challenging the field. In so doing, we hope that you will see the potential for becoming reflective about your practice, and about who will take an active role in shaping the future of adult education.

To highlight this dual focus of description and critique, the chapters of the book have been divided into three parts. Part One, “Foundations of Adult Education,” contains four chapters. Part Two, titled “The Organization and Delivery of Adult Education,” includes four chapters. The three chapters in Part Three are devoted to the topic of “Developing a Professional Field of Practice.”

Chapter One sketches the broad outlines of the field in terms of its definitions, major concepts, goals, and purposes; and it asks readers to situate their practice within this framework. The underlying theme of the chapter is that what “counts” as adult education is determined by the context and where one stands in relation to the field.

Chapter Two explores the philosophical foundations of adult education. We discuss major schools of educational philosophy and present a rationale for engaging in philosophical inquiry.

Recognizing the impossibility of covering the history of adult education in a single chapter, we wrote Chapter Three as an examination of how the history of the field has been approached and interpreted. As with philosophy, we present a number of arguments for studying history.
Part One concludes with a chapter that outlines three critical issues related to the foundations of adult education practice: whether we should strive for unity, whether we should align with the rest of education, and whether the primary focus of our activity should be the individual or society.

In Part Two, Chapters Five through Eight center on the organization and delivery of adult education. Chapter Five outlines how agencies and organizations deliver formal adult education in the United States. In addition to institutionally based typologies, we map the field by content area and personnel. We also address the process involved in delivering programs.

Chapter Six focuses on the learner in adult education, addressing who participates and why, what they are studying, and so on. We also cover some basic information about the nature of adult learning.

Chapter Seven shifts to a global context. We first describe what adult education is like in other parts of the world, then attempt to conceptualize international adult education as a forum for exchanging ideas and experiences. We also discuss international adult education as a part of the academic discipline of comparative studies.

Chapter Eight focuses on the issues related to the organization and delivery of adult education. Here we focus on the troublesome issues of opportunity, access, and participation. Since the barriers and responses are common to most countries, this chapter is written with a global perspective.

Part Three contains three chapters related to the development of adult education as a professional field of practice. Chapter Nine examines current aspects of the professionalization of adult education. We look at three elements of what constitutes a profession: professional associations, literature and information resources in the field, and academic preparation.

While many important developments in the adult education field are linked to professionalization, a vital element of adult education takes place outside the mainstream. In Chapter Ten, we explore this “invisible” side of the field by looking at who these edu-
cators are and what they do. A major emphasis of this chapter is on efforts to promote adult education for social change.

Chapter Eleven serves to bring closure to the book by addressing some of the tensions and issues related to the very different visions of adult education offered in the previous two chapters. The chapter closes with a discussion of possible future directions for adult education.

Acknowledgments

A number of people have contributed their time and expertise toward making this book possible. To University of Tennessee graduate students who offered comments on earlier drafts of Chapter Three, and to University of Georgia doctoral students Emuel Aldridge, Lilian Hill, Patricia Reeves, and Debra Templeton, we thank you for the many hours you devoted to editing draft chapters, tracking down references, and helping us assemble the final manuscript. A special thanks goes to Lilian Hill for her long hours of work on the index, and to Patricia Brockett, who assisted in the final preparation of the index. Our grateful appreciation also goes to colleagues Ronald Cervero, Carolyn Clark, Tal Guy, and Arthur Wilson, who critiqued the book’s organization and draft chapters. Your suggestions did much to strengthen the book. To Arthur Wilson, who also served as a manuscript reviewer for Jossey-Bass (along with Adrianne Bonham and a third, anonymous reviewer), we thank you for your detailed reading and helpful critique. Finally, we want to acknowledge family members Robert Rowden and Patricia and Megan Brockett, who lovingly endured the absences, stresses, and anxieties associated with our writing this book.

August 1996

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