

A Reflective Book Review

Andre P. Grace and Tonette S. Rocco and Associates. *Challenging the Professionalization of Adult Education: John Ohliger and Contradictions in Modern Practice*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass 355 pp

John Ohliger was the most influential 20th Century adult education intellectual in the United States working outside of the university. His was a small circle of persons such as Sam Brightman, Ron Gross and Myles Horton. He was a public intellectual in a tradition that as Canadians we can understand and relate to. Because he worked outside the academy by choice, he was not as well known as others of his generation such as Malcolm Knowles. In reading the Grace and Rocco book, many of my own memories of John Ohliger were brought to life again.

It was November of 1970, I was sitting in the Library of the Institute of Adult Education on Lumumba Street across from Mnazi Moja Park in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. I had come upon the newsletter of the Media and Adult Education unit of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education. There was a dampish stack of some 20-25 issues of this 8 1/2" X 11" cyclostyled publication somewhat cooled by the only air conditioner anywhere in the four stories of the Institute. I was a young man fresh from my Doctoral course work at UCLA in California who had been recently hired as a Research Fellow in the Institute. I was working on the evaluation of one of our radio study group programmes and was eager to find out anything I could about a field that I knew next to nothing about.

On page three, I found a small tongue-in-cheek article about another Institute of Adult Education. It seems that the Editor of the newsletter had found out that a certain pornography shop in California had taken the name Institute of Adult Education in the interest of demonstrating the potential educational value of their line of print and video materials. The Editor was incensed at this willful misdirection of the unsuspecting public and was alerting the readership to this affront. I turned the newsletter over to find the name and address of the editor. John Ohliger at Ohio State University in the United States. As a way of continuing the irony, I slipped a blue foldable airmail envelope into my Olympia typewriter and penned a letter of protest to the fact that this influential publication had preferred to give attention to the dark sheep of the Institute of Adult Education family while ignoring the brilliant version that even then was doing pioneering work in media and adult education however thousand kilometers away. I offered to send some materials from our radio listening group campaigns.

I heard back from John within a month, which for those who can remember international postal service, meant that John has responded at once. He was delighted to learn about the work going on in Tanzania. He told me that he had done his own graduate work on radio listening groups, one of Canada's proud adult education inventions. He told me that he had done his Doctoral work as I was doing,

at UCLA, and that he had worked with Paul Sheats, the adult education Elder who had had the reputation for supporting progressive student issues in the late 1960s. I arrived at UCLA in 1968, two years after John had finished and left. But while I was to fall amongst adult educators eventually, my Doctoral work at that time was done in comparative and international education.

We did not stay in continual touch after an initial flurry of letters. I was carried away by the energies to build a socialist and participatory Tanzania and by my own struggles to carryout research and do my own Doctoral thesis. It was during those days that I became interested in and convinced of the need for other ways to do research; to find more engaged and participatory ways to create or co-create knowledge. When I left Dar es Salaam, I went to the Institute of Development Studies at Sussex for a year and then joined the late J. Roby Kidd in the task of building the International Council for Adult Education. Using the ICAE as an organizing base, Ted Jackson, the late dian marino (both OISE graduate students) with help from Deborah Barndt, a Doctoral student at Michigan State University, but living in Toronto, we founded the Participatory Research Group. It was in that context that I next encountered John.

In November of 1978, Ted Jackson and I drove down the 401 expressway from Toronto to Detroit to take part in the American Association for Adult Education national meeting. Our objective was to introduce the concept of "Participatory Research" to the adult education community. We had been gaining confidence in the effectiveness of this kind of work in building and strengthening community and felt that it was a contribution to a potential enlarging of the progressive dimensions of adult education. We had heard that John had left Ohio State University and that he had moved to Madison Wisconsin to found Basic Choices, a space for clarifying political thoughts and actions. We hoped that John would be open to working with us in some ways to expand a progressive North American space for radical adult education. We wanted to meet with John and his colleagues.

We may have met at Wayne State University where John had had some roots from his early days as a labour adult educator. It was not the plush rooms of the Cobo Hall and convention centre where the main meetings were underway. It was at the end of the day, a small classroom with one Venetian blinded window allowing a kind of sepia light into the room. I recall that Ted Jackson and I were there and of course John Ohliger was there. I am not sure who else was with John that day, but it may have been David Williams and/or David Guellette two of the folks, along with Phyllis Cunningham who had recently founded NAVL, the National Alliance for Voluntary Learning. They were in Detroit as part of what was to become a substantial voice to keep adult education voluntary and democratic in the face of the rise of what John famously called Mandatory Compulsory Education.

We listened to each other. John spoke about what was happening to adult education and how far from its democratic ideal it has come. The field of adult education and its leaders were conspiring with professionalizing forces and the market everywhere to require people to "up-grade" their knowledge, to keep up with a

falsely theorized "knowledge explosion". Democratic, open, exploratory learning for citizenship and as a tool for helping to create a better community for everyone was in danger of disappearing. He urged us to join NAVL, to help him support the publication of Basic Choices and join with his vision.

Ted and I spoke about our evolving work in participatory research and community-based adult education which had grown out of an amalgam of Tanzanian inspired socialist values and Freirian pedagogy, Ted's work in rail camps and out ports of Newfoundland with Frontier College, dian mario's use of drawing and the arts for social action and Deborah Barndt's experiences in a socialist Peru using photography for social change. Neither John and his group nor Ted and I as we spoke felt represented by the work of Malcolm Knowles, the leading American adult education guru of the time. All of us respected Roby Kidd, our Canadian internationalist.

I suspect that both of our groups were hoping that the other one would throw their lot in lock, stock and barrel into their framework. John was generous in his response to our work, but clear that he felt uncomfortable with the socialist flavour of our discourse at the time. We were delighted to meet an important adult education intellectual who was, as we were, interested in having an impact on the field of adult education; move it either forward to a new place or help it maintain a firm grasp on its democratic roots. In the end, we felt that the single focus of NAVL on combating mandatory compulsory education, while certainly worth a struggle was limiting. We left the meeting as friends, allies and pledged to do whatever we could to support one another. We contributed information and our modest financial contributions to Basic Choices and kept each other faithfully informed of strategic directions and outrages that we were cooking up over the next few years. The support of Basic Choices and John for our work continued through and into the 1990s as he helped to give visibility to the founding of the North American Alliance for Popular and Adult Education (NAAPAE) that to this day is the official North American regional member of the International Council for Adult Education. Our beloved mutual friend Phyllis Cunningham was the strongest and most effective link between these complimentary expressions of democratic learning.

Like so many in the lovely book that Tonette Rocco and Andre Grace have spoken about and given voice to, my relationship over the years with John was through letters, the receipt of Basic Choices newsletters, and quotational bibliographies. We exchanged a number of letters about the politics of the left and about organizing adult educators at the national level. I sent him my first book of poems some 30 years ago. He sent me back a quotational bibliography about poems and adult learning and included both some of my own work and work of my sister Jo Van Loo in his references. I wrote him about song and received back a similar quotational bibliography on music and adult education.

The last time that I had a long conversation with John was in 1990. He had finally been invited to deliver the keynote address for the Social Philosophy Luncheon at the AAACE in Salt Lake City that year. I had never heard John on the central

platform of the body that he had railed against for so many years. He was spellbinding. His talk was a patient and investigative journalistic tribute to those who had struggled to build a democratic ethos in the field. He gave us the names of the women, nearly all women, who not a single other man in the field had ever told us about, who organized the meetings, who did the work and who needed to be acknowledged. That was the moment for me when the great gift that was John Ohliger became most visible for me.

The Salt Lake City meeting of the AAACE was the best large adult education conference that I ever attended in the United States, also one of the last. Phyllis Cunningham, Gary Eyre, Jack Mezirow and a cast of hundreds put adult education on trial for departing from its democratic roots. It was found guilty as charged to a great roar from the assembled.

John was older than I was, but not as old as my mentor Roby Kidd. He was in dialogue with the ideas of all of the influential American and some international adult educators: Lindeman, Knowles, Horton, Illich, Reimer, Freire, Kidd, London and more. This book reminds us of a still unfinished task that we have as Canadian adult educators to do some similar work to bring to life the still cogent thoughts of our own intellectual figures. We have lots of books on Coady and even Jimmy Tompkins, but the debates about the professionalization of the field that so incenses John in the United States also incensed Alex Sim and David Smith of Ontario who always felt that Roby Kidd and Alan Thomas had joined hands with the devil in taking adult education away from its social movement roots in the years after Ned Corbett left the centre stage. This book reminds us that history is not about the past. It is about us.

John traded a life as an outsider to a field of study that was already an outsider to the larger market forces. He traded this life for one where intellectual life, modesty, sustainability, dialogue and direct contact with his community was central. He had done so for reasons of personal integrity and consistency. It was not an easy life for him I suspect. He could be grumpy even with his friends. His politics, his friendships, his intellectual wanderings, his pleasures and his foibles seemed to come from a desire to be authentically present; to live a holistic and an integrated life. This appealed to me when I first met him, appealed to me as I have tried to shape my own life around knowledge and democracy, and through this book and this pre-conference I hope will appeal to many others who seek a better and more just world.

As far as I know the last thing that John wrote about me in *Basic Choices* was after the Salt Lake City meeting in 1990. I had decided to leave my position as Secretary-General of the International Council for Adult Education. I was unsure what I would do after that. John reported, "I have learned with delight that Budd Hall has decided to leave his position as Secretary-General of the ICAE. He says that he will take up the life of a poet"

A Toast to you John. Your life **is** a poem.

Budd L Hall, University of Victoria

Remarks for the CASAE Pre-Conference on John Ohliger, May 29, 2010