

**In the Face of Neoliberalism and other Evil Things: Canadian Adult Education as a Social Movement**

A Review of

Grace, A. (2013). *Lifelong learning as critical action: International perspectives on people, politics, policy and practice*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press. 298 pp. \$56.95 CAD (paperback).

Nesbit, T., Brigham, S., Taber, N., & Gibb, T. (Eds.). (2013). *Building on critical traditions: Adult education and learning in Canada*. Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishers. 365 pp. \$39.95 CAD (paperback).

Silver, J. (Ed.). (2013). *Moving forward giving back: Transformative Aboriginal adult education*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing. 156 pp. \$21.95 CAD (paperback).

Nesbit makes a very persuasive case in his introduction to *Building on Critical Traditions: Adult Education and Learning in Canada*. He argues that Canadian adult education can be best understood both in its history and its contemporary manifestations as a social movement. He reminds us of the emergence of Canadian adult education in the women's emancipation movements, the growth of organized labor, the peace movements, Indigenous sovereignty and justice, queer rights, immigrant women and more. He contends as well that other social movements are rich sites of learning. Reading these three books by and/or about Canadian adult education at one sitting on a Saturday morning in Victoria, British Columbia reaffirms the Nesbit thesis, a thesis which is shared by the other editors and authors of the *Building* book. In a world where we hear so much about the demise of adult education, the loss of the critical dimension of adult learning, of the confiscation of adult education by the neoliberal demons of the night, it is wondrously uplifting to find in these three books a collection of writings, dreams, rants, poetic riffs and acknowledgements to the traditional lands of our Indigenous peoples. The Canadian adult education movement in spite of every reason why it should have been crushed and utterly transformed into the porridge of instrumentalism is alive, is exciting and contributes to, paraphrasing what André Grace says about his vision of lifelong learning as critical action, a way to make a road to hope and healing. Let us turn to what readers will find in these books.

*Building on Critical Traditions* is the third in a series of edited volumes that survey the field of adult education and the 9<sup>th</sup> in a tradition of Canadians chronicling their theories and practices over the years. It might be argued that the tradition of the Canadian overview of adult education books have themselves contributed to a collective sense of who we are in the field. Have they also reinforced the idea of hope and better society as a central goal of adult education? It is impressive that so many of the Canadian scholars who write of history, theory, community, the economy and work, universities, and immigration are highly respected international scholars. This book speaks to the notion that adult education

is not that body of practice paid for by some department of government. Adult education exists in each community organization, in communities large and small, in formal and informal settings, in protracted struggles for rights and recognition, for survival against violence and discrimination. Each reader will find chapters/authors that attract him or her. For me the Chapters by Atleo on Aboriginal Adult Education, Quigley on literacy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Butterwick on class and poverty, Clover on arts and activism, Carpenter and Mojab on the 'critical' in critical adult education and Guo on recognitive justice and immigration caught my attention as particular signposts for Canadian practice.

André Grace has a chapter in the *Building on Critical Condition* book, but is also the sole author of *Lifelong Learning as Critical Action*. Grace's scholarship can be read as history, as critical theory, as critical pedagogy, and as sexual and gender minority studies. With this book, Grace stakes his claim for learning and critical economic studies. This is a book imagined at the peak of the 2008 global financial meltdown with each page heated by the rage of massive economic savagery perpetrated by the few on the many. Read in 2016 several years later, the lessons of the 2008 depression that have been learned are that the diminishing middle classes of the better off nations of the world can be counted on to bail-out the rich no matter how criminal their behavior. Anyone wanting to corroborate the Grace hypothesis can take a look at the film *The Big Short* that step by step illuminates the steps taken by the collective financial securities industry to hoodwink the global publics. While millions of people lost their livelihoods as well as their homes and are still struggling to avoid the street for a home, those who were responsible have gone unpunished.

Grace takes the lifelong learning discourse head on. In the Nesbit *et al.*, volume, the authors eschew the lifelong learning discourse as diversionary and incomplete. Grace acknowledges the impact of neoliberalism operating through structures such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and richer nation governments to narrow lifelong learning to an exclusionary and soulless practice. His intellectual response is the call for a transformative discourse that he refers to as 'lifelong learning as critical action'. In his words, "I use the idea...to provide perspectives on lifelong learning as a multi-dimensional historical and contemporary phenomenon with the potential to address instrumental, social, and cultural concerns within a more holistic approach to learning" (p. 11). His book, which arises from his groundings in the social movement traditions of Canadian adult education scholarship, nevertheless is also framed within a larger international policy and practice world. He references the gay rights movements in the US and elsewhere, the world of international policymaking, UK studies, UNESCO reports, the global war against welfare and young people, and much more.

Let me turn now to the Silver book on *Transformative Aboriginal Adult Education*. Based on work in Winnipeg, Manitoba's urban north end over a period of many years, this is the first book that I am aware of with a focus solely on Aboriginal adult education. And while the geographic scope of the book is limited, the implications, principles and issues raised by these authors (nine of the fifteen being Indigenous) will be understood by Indigenous persons, academics, and adult educators across Canada. And I suspect Indigenous Peoples in many parts of the world would understand many of these stories. The *Aboriginal Adult Education* book is a very important one if we understand adult education as a social movement. Let me mention my only disappointment about the book and then move on to

why I feel that it is so important. I wish that in the spirit of community that these stories come from, the book had been published as having been written by each of the contributors rather than being the Jim Silver, edited volume. I wish no disrespect to Jim as an historic ally, but it would be great, knowing the thought behind the book, to see all the Indigenous authors and others' names on the cover of the book. We look forward to the first book on Aboriginal adult education that will be edited and/or authored by an Indigenous writer that is surely on its way.

The Canadian Government has recently released a groundbreaking report through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a commission that was charged with examining the impact of Canada's historic relationship with the original people of this part of the world. The introduction to the report notes that,

For over a century, the central goals of Canada's Aboriginal policy were to eliminate Aboriginal governments; ignore Aboriginal rights; terminate the Treaties; and, through a process of assimilation, cause Aboriginal peoples to cease to exist as distinct legal, social, cultural, religious and racial entities in Canada. The establishment and operation of residential schools were a central element of this policy, which can best be described as "cultural genocide. (p. 9)

In the context of moving to reconciliation the report further notes, "virtually all aspects of Canadian society may need to be reconsidered" (p. 8). Canada is at a turning point, quite aside from the variety of challenges that we face as Canadians, as activists and as adult educators, the measure of ourselves as a socially just place to live might well be said to depend on our ability collectively to take up the challenges laid out for us by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The task of reconciliation is perhaps the largest adult education project that we have as a nation.

For these reasons, the Aboriginal Adult Education book is so very important. Read what the late Claudette Mitchell, a Barrenlands First Nations Mother and Grandmother, wrote at the beginning of the chapter on Aboriginal women and adult education done in collaboration with Mearle Chief, Debra Diubaldo, Darlene Klyne, Wendy McNab and Linda Smith, "*Tansi*. Before I begin, I would like to honour and acknowledge the gifts that have given me the strength and resiliency to write this" (p. 17). In our part of Canada, no formal occasion happens without acknowledging the First People's on whose land the event is taking place. These are not practices that are common in academic circles of most non-Indigenous people.

This edited volume speaks of learning, healing, spirituality, transformation, walking in two worlds, resilience, hard work, and the translation of rage into action for change. And these feelings and processes are inseparable. They are part of an Aboriginal adult education rooted in culture and the language. These are powerful contributions to the continuing evolution of a social movement adult education. One element of the Winnipeg stories that I would have like to have seen developed a bit more is the question of the loss of, preservation of, and revitalization of Indigenous languages. While it may be implicit in many of the stories, bringing that struggle, an adult education task of historic proportions to a brighter light is critical.

Perhaps the *AEQ* should have asked a non-Canadian to do the review of these books! I feel much pride to be counted as part of the Canadian adult education movement when I read these three books. I strongly commend these books to adult educators everywhere. While the contributors may be Canadian, the context of Canadian politics and culture, it may be argued, are such that reflections on the practices of adult education, lifelong learning for critical action, and Aboriginal adult education have resonance in many different jurisdictions and settings. As Grace says in his closing poem, adult education has the power to help us, “do something to lift us out of the vortex” (p. 254).

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