

**La Verneda-Sant Martí Adult Education Center:
Ethics in the Curriculum:
A Study of Ethical Frameworks and Moral Imperatives Embedded
in Adult Education Graduate Programs**

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Abstract: This study concerns the ways in which programs designed to prepare adult educators for practice represent moral imperatives and ethical frameworks in the curriculum. Preliminary findings support the central role of social and political context and personal biography of faculty in determining which imperatives and frameworks are reflected in the curriculum.

Background

Adult education as a field of university study has historically been vitally concerned with social injustice, inequality, and oppression. These concerns find expression in the research that is conducted, what is taught, and the discourses given space in the curriculum. In the last two decades there has been what some regard as a discernable shift away from these traditional values to a greater concern with adult education as an instrument of government and the corporate sector used to address issues associated with globalization and economic competitiveness. Related to this shift has been criticism of the vocationalization of adult education and the attendant emphasis on the development of vocationally-relevant knowledge, skills and values.

During this same period, greater attention has been given to the ethics of adult education and the moral imperatives that guide its practitioners. In the past decade in particular, there has developed a substantial literature that addresses the ethics of practice and debates the appropriateness of traditional models of professionalization with their requirement that practitioners be exposed to a more or less uniform curriculum and adopt a code of ethics that privileges certain values and forms of practice. These developments and debates have occurred in the absence of any systematic study of the curricula in adult education graduate programs to determine the ethical frameworks and moral imperatives embedded within.

Research Objective

The primary objective of this study is to identify and analyze the ethical frameworks and moral imperatives that are implicitly or explicitly embedded in the curricula of representative adult education graduate programs in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Southern

Africa, Australia and New Zealand. Moral imperative was defined as an idea about why the field of adult education should exist and what aims its practitioners should be working to achieve. Ethical framework was defined as ideas about what constitutes morally-defensible practice.

Methodology

Face-to-face and telephone interviews were conducted from October, 2000 through May, 2001 with more than 80 faculty members working in 35 universities in 8 countries. Interviews focused on which moral imperatives and ethical frameworks are reflected in the curriculum, how they are represented, contextual influences on the framing of the imperatives and frameworks, and how faculty members' biographies and moral commitments influence what and how they teach.

Preliminary Findings

A thorough analysis of more than 80 interview transcripts will take many months, but several preliminary findings can safely be reported at this early stage. First, moral imperatives and ethical frameworks are most often represented indirectly or tacitly in the curriculum. It is rare that faculty explicitly devote space in the curriculum to discussions of the ethical/moral dimensions of adult education. Generally, faculty use a combination of literature and modeling to represent the imperatives and frameworks they believe are important for adult educators to understand. It was noteworthy that those in Southern Africa expressed concern and frustration with the lack of regionally-relevant literature to use in their programs. Second, social and political context strongly influence the range and form of imperatives represented to students. A *social change/empowerment imperative* was dominant in those contexts where resistance to oppression and race-, class-, or ethnicity-based discrimination had a long history. A critical imperative was dominant in those contexts where political stability and university autonomy were relatively high but where the dominant political ideology was at odds with the largely 'liberal-leftist-radical' ideologies of faculty. An *instrumental imperative* was dominant in those contexts where adult education was viewed as an important tool for economic development and the struggle to compete successfully in an increasingly globalized economy. In more than a few universities, two or more of these imperatives were represented in the curriculum simultaneously which, in some, stimulated productive dialogue among faculty and students while in others provoked tensions and splits into different ideological camps.

Not surprisingly, personal history and biography are central in determining the moral commitments of faculty and the decisions they make about the curriculum. A 'missionary' perspective was reported by faculty in several countries who had come from families with religious or spiritual commitments to help others or had developed this perspective through their own search for a meaningful life. Although university faculty occupy privileged positions, many reported experiencing or observing various forms of inequality and injustice contributing to a 'resistance' perspective in which they felt responsible for naming and resisting these forces. Early encounters by many with Marxism, critical theory, and feminist theory provided interpretive lenses for understanding this experience and the relationship between education and resistance.

There are clearly global forces at work that are influencing who enrolls in adult education graduate programs and the character of curricula. Many programs included in this study are

experiencing a growing proportion of students with a primary orientation to human resource development and training. Although some faculty are troubled by the prospect that this will diminish the social purpose focus of adult education, many report coming to terms with this shift and adjusting their curricula and programs, some to the point where they are actively recruiting this segment because it is seen as an important growth area and one that is being encouraged by government education and training policies.

Tip of a Moral Iceberg

These preliminary observations from a large and complex data set only hint at the new insights that are possible from this study. Still to be analyzed are the demographic characteristics of study participants, the impact they believe their programs have on the moral/ethical frameworks of students, the instructional resources and processes they use to help students engage with these ideas, and forces that are substantially influencing the moral imperatives of their programs.