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# What's in it for me? Barriers to participation in adult learning in small communities of western Canada

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines educators' and policymakers' efforts at addressing barriers and supporting adult students' access to, and success in, small communities in western Canada. Research indicates that, despite the provision of financial support and flexible and varied delivery modes, and a focus on meeting learner needs, adult learner participation rates in Canada are currently lower than those in other countries. Government policies and programmes are aimed at employability: they currently focus on trade and vocational training programmes that meet the needs of the job market. This single-minded approach of funding programmes that meet economic needs promotes the ideal that the primary purpose of education is the financial gain that comes from securing employment, or better employment, as a result of one's studies – this as opposed to recognising the role adult education can play in fostering social justice. What is argued here is that, in order to increase participation in adult education, one does not necessarily need greater resources but rather a shift in cultural values – a shift from valuing education solely as a means to employment towards valuing it as a means of individual and community development. Greater numbers of people must see the value of adult learning and recognise the ways that it can contribute to equity and social justice in their lives and communities. This article calls for research that will delve deeply into the barriers to participation in adult education in the wider context of our society. I hope that Canadian students, educators and policymakers will create room for social justice and equity alongside their employment-focused approach to adult learning, and that nations with an emerging discourse will revisit the implications of considering adult education as being solely aimed at employability.

## KEYWORDS

*adult education; training; barriers; participation; social justice*

## **Introduction**

In the first chapter of my career in adult education, I taught English-language classes to newcomers to Canada. When newcomers were asked why they were studying, the answers varied, but always referred in some way to improving their new life in their new country. The learning they sought – English-language skills – would allow them to develop relationships with their new neighbours, speak to their children’s teachers, improve their employment situations and participate in civic life. These responses relate to the role of adult education in ‘developing their capacity to participate more fully and critically in society’ (Connolly, 2016:88).

Adult education’s role in fostering equality and social justice is not as clear in the second chapter of my career, where I teach in the area of academic upgrading. Most of the learners are mature Canadian-born students. In contrast to my first demographic of learners, adult students requiring academic upgrading invariably respond to the question why they are studying with a response that relates to improving their employment situation rather than to living a better life. This focus on employability is held not only by students and prospective students, but also by society at large, including teachers, educational institutions and governments; and it represents a shift from a focus on social needs to the needs of the labour market. This single-minded approach to adult education fails to recognise that learning can be valued for its role in an individual’s development as a person and a citizen. Adult education also has the potential to foster social justice and equity in society, but may result in fewer Canadian adults’ engaging in learning opportunities. One might argue, therefore, that a cultural shift in values would be needed to increase participation rates significantly and, in so doing, create opportunities for adult education to play a significant role in social justice and equity in Canadian communities.

## **The context**

The two most westerly provinces in Canada, Alberta and British Columbia (BC), are resource-rich, with a large oil and gas industry in Alberta and a large forestry industry in British Columbia. According to demographic information published by the Government of British Columbia (2017a) and the Alberta Government (2017), they have a combined population of approximately nine million people, of whom just over 30% live in small cities of less than 100 000 people and in rural areas. There are numerous organisations that provide adult-learning opportunities, including community programmes, literacy organisations, colleges and technical training programmes. There is also an articulation system aimed at increasing access to post-secondary education for students living in rural areas; however, rural youths are still 11% less likely than their urban counterparts to engage in any post-secondary education (Looker, 2009:2, 7). The literacy statistics for the provinces are troubling. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (OECD, 2013) Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competency (PIAAC) found that 45% of adult British Columbians and Albertans were at or below literacy level two (OECD, 2013:80). This means they lack the literacy skills required to understand newspapers, instruction manuals, health information and basic legal documents such as

rental agreements (Decoda Literacy, nd). High-school completion rates are further evidence of a need for adult education: on average, 84% of public-school students in British Columbia (BC Ministry of Education, nd) and 83% of students in Alberta complete high school (Alberta Government, 2018). This leaves more than 15% of public-school students unable to pursue further education, owing to the lack of a diploma. In addition, many students who successfully graduate from high school lack the prerequisites often required to further their education, such as the completion of science courses or minimum grades in English courses. With such limitations, individuals might struggle to pursue their goals and lack the skills required to engage in civic society, to voice their needs and to demand their rights. Yet the participation rates in all types of adult education in Canada sit at 50% (Livingstone & Raykov, 2013:3), and they are considerably lower when looking specifically at non-formal education, in which only 31% of Canadians participate (Conference Board of Canada, 2018). 'Non-formal education' refers to structured learning that results in knowledge or skills, but not credentials, including the language and literacy classes that, according to the statistics, are needed. Canada's participation rates are notably lower than those in other modernised countries (Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009; Conference Board of Canada, 2018). Despite the availability of statistics, there is a shortage of literature explaining the reasons for, and proposing solutions to, low participation rates.

## **Dealing with barriers**

Rubenson and Desjardins' (2009) bounded agency model provides a useful framework for considering the reasons for a lack of participation in adult education. The model organises barriers to participation into three categories: situational, dispositional and institutional. Situational barriers include lack of time as well as family commitments, whereas dispositional barriers include personal insecurities, negative past educational experiences and a perception that there is not enough to gain by returning to school (Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009). Institutional barriers, such as financial reasons and the accessibility of courses, are the barriers that are most effectively addressed in western Canada.

Through Student Aid British Columbia and Alberta Works, students enrolling in most adult education programmes are able to access financial assistance for student fees, materials, transportation and childcare. In addition, students in Alberta may also receive cost-of-living assistance (Alberta Government, 2015). Rubenson and Desjardin (2009:118) argue that financial barriers 'lower the extent of participation, but may not entirely prohibit participation'. The assistance provided typically does not equate to the amount an individual may earn if they are otherwise employed, so students often choose to study part-time while working.

It is my experience that students' time commitments to work and home life combined with limited programme resources make providing appropriate course offerings, schedules and delivery modes challenging for providers of adult education. Some of the ways providers in small communities have responded to the challenges are by offering multilevel classes and varying delivery modes.

Multilevel classes make it viable to provide instruction to heterogeneous student populations in communities where there are insufficient students to provide single-level classes. Some examples of multilevel classes are Fundamental English at Selkirk College in the small city of Nelson, British Columbia, and government-sponsored Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) provided by Bow Valley College in the town of Banff, Alberta. Fundamental English is a course at pre-Grade 10 level; it is typically taken by adult basic education students, adult special education students and English-language students whose needs range across six levels of study. Similarly, Bow Valley College has accommodated six levels of LINC learners in two to three classes in Banff since the start of its regional stewardship initiative in 2011 (Bow Valley College, 2011). Another aspect of Bow Valley College's Regional Stewardship Program is providing LINC Homestudy, the online version of LINC classes.

Online learning is a growing alternative to traditional classes (McGreal & Anderson, 2007) for students who find scheduling to be a barrier to participation and also a way of increasing access to education for students living in areas without face-to-face classes. However, there is the question of personal suitability for online study. In addition to the obvious need for access to the Internet, online study requires study skills, self-discipline and computer competence, which the most disadvantaged adult students and the literacy and adult basic education students are less likely to have than those who have had positive past educational experiences. Therefore, online study is limited in its ability to serve those most in need. In the School of Academic Upgrading at Selkirk College, some students attend class regularly, others work independently and attend class only as needed or as is possible, and yet others study through remote delivery courses where their online contact with their course instructor is paired with face-to-face learning support provided by a local contact instructor. The remote delivery format has the benefit of increasing access to courses for students and providing additional work for teachers in very small communities. Instructors on the programme find that learner support must be plentiful and easy to access in order for many students to succeed.

Some methods of learner support are significant in getting educators to help students overcome the dispositional barriers of personal insecurities and negative past educational experiences; however, factors that can build barriers rather than remove them are beyond the control of organisations and institutions. For instance, educational programmes are vulnerable to sudden changes in government (Tucket, 2015), and this can threaten participation rates. For example, in 2015, the right-leaning Liberal government in British Columbia implemented tuition for adult basic education. Service providers then scrambled to put support in place for students who could not afford to pay the tuition fees and to implement new student-intake procedures that included funding applications. Two years later, when the left-leaning New Democrats came to power, they reversed the Liberals' decision and eliminated tuition fees for adult basic education (Government of British Columbia, 2017b). Although this was a welcome change, changes in administrative processes can easily deter prospective students who find navigating institutional structures daunting, paradoxically creating a barrier for adult learners.

Of all the dispositional barriers, however, a lack of perceived benefit is the most difficult to overcome because it is intrinsic to the belief that greater employability is the only reason for adults to go to school. Accordingly, the reasoning goes, if one is not unemployed, or at least not very unhappily employed, there is limited incentive to participate in adult education. The practicalities of going back to school to improve one's employment situation are difficult to argue with, and in themselves are nothing to take issue with. The problem is when employability is perceived to be the only reason for participating in adult education. Besides being practical, studying for greater employability, and therefore to earn more money, is also more tangible than the social justice perspective of empowering individuals through self-development. While there may be exceptions, the ability to act for oneself and to engage fully in society as a Canadian citizen is often largely a by-product of the adult-education experience rather than an objective of an individual course.

Viewed from this perspective, learning that fosters equity and creates the capacity for social justice occurs incidentally rather than as part of a curriculum. Two illustrations derive from my own classroom. In the first, a student in a writing class learnt about labour unions through a reading intended as an example of a cause-and-effect essay. The student proclaimed not to know anything about unions prior to the reading and felt strongly that the peer group would also lack that understanding. A lengthy class discussion ensued, which led the students towards a new or increased awareness of labour unions. In the future, this awareness may equip them to use a union to ensure that their needs are met and their rights are respected in the workplace.

The second example occurred in a class in which the course objectives focus on learner success through personal development. In a lesson on learner awareness, a student spoke of recently learning that education is a right. This had never been understood throughout the student's troubled school history; instead, the student's struggles in education had been regarded as a personal failing. With this new understanding, the student feels entitled to an education and is now better able to insist on obtaining what is needed for personal success. This type of knowledge is what is required for individuals to participate fully in society and to achieve a socially just and equitable society.

As argued above, the need for adult education to foster social justice and equity is often overlooked. Dealing with this belief is what Canadian educators and policymakers have ignored in their attempts to remove barriers to participation and success in the case of adult learners. Around the world, there is a growing acknowledgement that culture plays a significant role in either fostering or discouraging adults' decisions to return to school. Despite its focus on the global economy, the OECD (2013:188) attributes significant differences in adult education participation rates in developed nations to 'major differences in learning cultures'. And UNESCO's Education for All: 2000–2015 Achievements and Challenges report indirectly touches on the role of culture with its findings on who is most likely to participate in adult learning. The first finding is that the candidates most likely to participate in adult learning are those who already hold a diploma (UNESCO, 2015:128). This is true for almost every country, and Canada is no exception. In Canada, those with a high school education are almost 1.5 times more likely to pursue further learning than those who do not have a high school education (UNESCO, 2015:129). From this, one can infer that those individuals had a positive enough

initial educational experience not to be deterred from further study; furthermore, one can argue that those individuals saw the value of education beyond employability. Admittedly, research is needed to test this argument, but statistics from Canada's neighbouring country, the United States, indicate that 69.6% of the students in post-secondary programmes surveyed indicated that ideas and an appreciation of ideas were very important in their decision to study (Sledge & Fishman, 2014:13). The second of UNESCO's (2015:128) findings that is further evidence of the link between cultural beliefs about adult education and participation is that the candidates most likely to participate in adult education are those with educated parents – indicating that there is a culture of learning in the family. Given that culture is learnt from the first days of life (Miller, Van Esterik & Van Esterik, 2001:18) and that families are cultural carriers, it follows that the children of well-educated parents hold the value of learning for all as a cultural belief and that the children of less-educated parents do not.

### **Links between adult education and employability**

Ideally, the belief in the value of education apart from employment would spread from the educated to the less educated, but this is contrary to the ideological trend of the past five decades which ties adult education to employment. At its inception, adult education was believed to improve society by fostering equality and giving citizens agency in times of change (Rubenson & Walker, 2006). However, this belief has shifted over time. Through the 1980s and 1990s, this ideology that centred on socio-emotional well-being was transformed into one where that well-being was tied directly to one's earning potential (Rubenson & Walker, 2006). Indeed, it was in 1985 that the economy first appeared as a concern: at UNESCO's International Conference on Adult Education (Milana, 2012:786), which brought into focus the emergence of globalisation and its focus on the economy (Dreher, Gaston & Martens, 2008:2), a cultural belief was fostered that the sole reason for pursuing adult education is to secure either employment or employment with greater earning potential. Today, this is evident in western Canada's marketing of adult education, in industry influence on curricula, and in government policies and programmes.

Community colleges' marketing and public relations routinely focus on the employability of their graduates. Bow Valley College in Alberta, for instance, has regularly used the marketing tag line, 'Learn a better living', and, in 2013, the premier of the province praised it for producing graduates who 'are able to meet the province's diverse economic needs' (Bow Valley College, 2011). In British Columbia, Vancouver Community College (nd) advertises on its website that 95% of its graduates are employed, and the website of the British Columbia Colleges association (2017–2018) states that 'colleges provide real opportunities and pathways to employment', illustrating how the social justice aspect of education for adults is either ignored or trumped by employability up to the highest academic levels. This contrasts significantly with a web page of the University of British Columbia Library (17 September 2018) which shines a spotlight on a library exhibition on LGBT2SQIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans (transgender, genderqueer, non-binary) two-spirit, queer, questioning, intersex and asexual) history, and another web page of the University (nd) which has a research chair proclaim, 'We'll never stop fighting for equality'.

Other evidence of the tight link between adult education and employability in Canada is the increasing influence of industry in educational programming. Community colleges partner with stakeholders through groups such as the Kootenay Regional Workforce Table situated in south-central British Columbia as an integral part of programme planning and development. The purpose of the group is to 'identify economic development opportunities and to make recommendations on training programs to meet the demand for jobs in the area' (Kootenay Regional Workforce Table, 2013). Although pragmatic, the difficulty with this type of collaboration is that pedagogical considerations are replaced by immediate industry needs (Sumner, 2008:35), which forces programming to be narrow and short-sighted. This results in bare-bones, intensive programmes that neglect the fostering of global citizens (Bishundayal, 2014).

Post-secondary marketing and industry influence in post-secondary programme and curriculum planning are the result of government policies and programmes aimed primarily at building the nation's workforce. This is problematic, because a narrow focus on worker skills and training pushes literacy, citizenship and personal development (Horvat, 2014:12, 30) into the background, where it is presented as an afterthought. Proof of this lies in rhetoric such as this passage from The Conference Board of Canada (2018):

Investing in education and training opportunities beyond one's initial schooling years – whether for maintaining, upgrading, or repurposing the skills of a labour force – is essential in the face of increased global competition and changing demographics, as well as for tackling socio-economic imbalances like unemployment, poverty, poor health, and other social exclusions.

This text only hints at social justice in the final thought. Unfortunately, the most prominent government messaging promotes adult education for employment exclusively. Both Alberta and British Columbia have government agencies tasked with growing their provincial workforces: Alberta Works and WorkBC. Work BC's Skills for Jobs Blueprint: Re-engineering Education and Training initiative, launched in 2014, states that education and training programmes that align with high-demand jobs will be funded (Government of British Columbia, 2014:12) and that

[r]eliable and up-to-date information will support our goal to better match training and education with industry needs and provide the best information on labour market trends to educators, counsellors, students and their families. This would not be problematic if there were also significant initiatives aimed at creating social justice and equity in our communities, but that is clearly not the case, because literacy and adult basic education programmes are replaced by work skills programmes (Horvat, 2014:30).

The cumulative effect of government actions and messaging is to reinforce the belief that employment is the purpose of adult education. As a result, participation rates will fluctuate with economies and adult education will do more to create income equity than to address broader inequalities in society.

Some research indicates that the rate of participation in adult education fluctuates with unemployment rates (Pennington, McGinty & Williams, 2002; Rubenson & Walker, 2006). Although there is research that challenges this belief, the current economic conditions and participation rates in British Columbia and Alberta support a correlation between unemployment and adult education participation rates and the claim that a cultural belief in education only as a means to employment is a significant factor in participation.

British Columbia currently has some of the lowest unemployment rates in Canada, ranging from 4.6 to 5% in urban areas and from 6.2 to 7.7% in southern communities, and up to 9.4% in northern communities (Government of Canada, nd). The participation rates at Selkirk College's School of Academic Upgrading and Development are correspondingly low (Selkirk College, nd). Allison Alder (2018), the school chair, reports that registration numbers are significantly lower at approximately 100 students compared with 150 on the programme the previous year. The college president also reports a downward trend in domestic enrolments over the past three years (Graeme, 2018). In contrast, Alberta is in the midst of an economic downturn, with unemployment rates at 6.4% and 8.3% in the two major cities, and at 6.8% and 10.6% in the southern and northern communities, respectively. With these uncharacteristically high rates, the number of students enrolling in adult education at Bow Valley College is strong (Imai, 2018). A further factor contributing to increased participation in adult education is federal government employment insurance (EI) programmes that allow individuals to take courses or undergo training while collecting EI (Government of Canada, 2018). Therefore, some individuals are opting out of participation in adult education until a lack of employment opportunities prompts them to return to school.

Under these conditions, adult education may serve only to create income equity rather than deal with broader inequities in society. In addition to reporting that Canadians participate less than citizens in other developed countries, The Conference Board of Canada indicates that Canadians have significantly fewer hours of instruction when they do participate. In 2008, Canadians received approximately 49 hours of instruction compared with 61 to 105 hours in European countries (The Conference Board of Canada, 2018). The less time adults spend at school, the fewer opportunities they will have to develop skills and knowledge for active citizenship and to develop the sense of agency necessary to be an advocate for themselves, their family and their community. The less obvious reason is that the focus on employment skills in adult education means that, in addition to having work-ready graduates spend less time in school, the curricula are trimmed to provide them with a shorter timeline than past programmes that had more well-rounded curricula.

### **Moving towards a new discourse**

With the exception of Rubenson and Desjardins' (2009) work on the bounded agency model, the available research into participation in adult education has been quantitative. This research tells educators and policymakers how many workers are needed in specific fields and how many adults participate in education, but it does not provide what Connolly (2016) refers to as 'really

useful research'. 'Really useful research' recognises the need for qualitative knowledge alongside quantitative evidence and placing the evidence in the broader social context in order to make possible a deeper understanding of, for instance, Canadians' dispositional barriers to participation in adult education. It is also needed so that the hypothesis presented here – that a cultural belief in adult education only as a means to employment is responsible for low participation rates – can be tested. Such 'really useful knowledge' (Connolly, 2016) would make space for change in the adult education discourse in Canada.

## **Conclusion**

The evolution of adult education has seen the narrowing of discourse about it from personal development and citizenship to employability. This has led to the belief that the sole purpose of adult education is to improve one's work prospects. In the context of relatively low unemployment in western Canada, this means that participation in adult education is low despite low high-school graduation rates and low literacy rates. Furthermore, the efficacy of educators' efforts aimed at removing situational and institutional barriers is reduced by the dispositional barriers which lead prospective Canadian students to conclude that, when one has a job, there is insufficient motivation to participate in adult education. Cultural beliefs must be determined and dealt with in order to increase participation rates and create opportunities in which adult education can make a significant contribution to social justice and equity. It is time for the adult education discourse to shift away from 'training people to adapt to the current economic order' (Sumner, 2008:35) towards fostering the capacity of citizens to participate fully in society.

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