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AAACE: Where are we going and where have we been? The Future of AAACE in light of its Past

By Amy D. Rose

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The American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE)—the umbrella organization for the diverse field of adult and continuing education—is undergoing a transformation, and with it comes the opportunity and the challenges to define itself and its purpose for the twenty-first century. As we, the board of AAACE, contemplate our future, we share with you a critical reflection on our past in order to shed light on fundamental issues, as well as the pitfalls to avoid and promises to embrace. We hope this will encourage your participation in the ongoing and dynamic process of growing and refreshing the association.

Formative and Early Years

AAACE is the latest incarnation of adult education associations dating back to 1921 when the National Education Association (NEA) formed its Department of Immigrant Education. In 1924, this became the Department of Adult Education. Originally, as the name suggests, this group served the teachers of immigrants; however, it was soon expanded to include teachers of adults within school-based programs (Knowles, 1994).

In 1926, the American Association for Adult Education (AAAE) was established through funding by the Carnegie Association. This Association

was founded to advance a particular vision of adult education, one that was community-based not school-based, and that was also non-vocational and non-utilitarian. However, this vision was never entirely clear, and it was subsequently undermined, first by the Great Depression and later by World War II (Rose, 1989). By 1941, the AAAE was withering, with its activities curtailed.

In 1949, a new burst of activity led to the merger of the two groups and the formation of the Adult Education Association of the USA commonly referred to as AEA. However, this marriage was not an easy one, and in 1952 the National Association for Public School Adult Educators (NAPSAE) was founded. As with its earlier incarnation, its mission was to work with teachers in school settings. The name was changed in to the National Association of Public and Continuing Adult Educators (NAPCAE) in 1972. In 1982, the two organizations merged (again!) forming the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE). At the time, AEA was a broad umbrella group of adult educators while NAPSAE was made up primarily of Adult Basic Education (ABE) and General Educational Development (GED) educators and administrators. This merger worked well for almost twenty years, bringing together two groups with intersecting histories (and some animosity). The ABE/GED teachers maintained a separate identity (and conference) through the Commission for Adult Basic Education (COABE). However in 2000, COABE broke away from AAACE to become an independent organization.

Recent Past

Since 2000, AAACE has gone through profound changes. These changes were not entirely due to the departure of COABE, but rather by the financial problems that precipitated COABE's exit. Membership dropped from over 5,000 to under 300 and the staff of the Association was reduced significantly. When the two groups split, COABE continued separately, and AAACE was left to reconsider its central purpose. With a much reduced membership, the principal issue was survival. The Association's activities were reduced to running the conference and publishing two journals, *Adult Learning* and *Adult Education Quarterly* (AEQ). While AEQ continued publication without problem, *Adult Learning*, lost its staff editor. This led to problems with publication that plague us still, although great improvements have been made in recent years.

Another problem revolved around the conference itself. With reduced membership, there was a smaller pool of individuals interested in attending. The mainstays of the conference were the Commission of Professors of Adult Education (CPAE), the Commission on Military Education and Training (CMET) and the Commission on International Adult Education (CIAE). The loss of staff exacerbated the problems. All of a sudden, there was no one to do the work of actually planning and running the annual conference. This fell to the one remaining employee* and the volunteer Board of Directors. The result was a classic case of dysfunction, with too much falling to a Board that was ill prepared to deal with the sudden increase in work.

While individuals worked valiantly to keep the organization alive, there were times when survival was a question.

Reviving AAACE

In recent years, the Association has significantly stabilized. Membership has increased dramatically, attendance at the annual conferences is up, and the work of the Board has expanded beyond running the conference. The structure of the Executive Committee now follows that of many other associations, with the president-elect in charge of the conference, thus freeing the president to address other issues.

The central task has been to clarify the Association's role in the future direction of adult education and to decide on strategies to move forward. As an umbrella organization, AAACE is the one adult education organization that appeals to individuals working across a broad array of adult education organizations and institutions. This broad purview is at once liberating and debilitating. It is difficult to think about possible activities for such a broadly-defined constituency. Part of the effort of redefinition has involved an ongoing focus on strategic planning which draws on the metaphor of AAACE as an umbrella organization to encompass both the broadly-defined area of adult education and the concomitant issues of policy and collaboration. But continually key questions remain. Specifically, how does such a diverse group translate discussion into coherent action?

Over the past few years, AAACE has been feeling its way. It has held two regional policy conferences to identify possible policy initiatives. These efforts signaled an attempt to re-engage with the broader issues facing the field. The first of these, held in 2007 in Maryland, brought together representatives from a variety of adult education organizations to discuss future trends and ways of collaborating

on a broad range of issues. The second conference, held in 2008 in Chicago, focused on regional development and the role of adult education and lifelong learning in achieving this end. The task of this conference was to brainstorm about possible areas of collaboration among regional institutions and to discuss various models used in other countries. Both of these conferences were extremely successful. Follow-through, however, has been challenging because of a lack of manpower and funds, but we are hopeful that headway will be made in both of these areas. Additionally, AAACE recently assumed the sponsorship of the *Journal of Transformation Education*. This is an exciting development, which we hope will open a new area within the Association.

The Association has been concerned with revitalization for almost ten years now. We have tried to grapple with the meaning of collaboration, and the possible activities that an association such as ours can hope to accomplish. Our task is to decide collaboratively what activities the Association should undertake beyond hosting an annual conference and publishing two (now three) journals. This has resulted in active reflection about our core mission and purpose: What do we want the Association to be? What is its function? How committed are the members to its existence? What can it accomplish?

At its essence, AAACE is an organization whose core mission is to bring together adult educators from a broad spectrum of practice. At its most basic level, AAACE functions as a central space where adult educators can discuss the common issues beyond the contextual domains that define their existence. However, defining the core areas that multiple

stakeholders hold in common is open to interpretation.

What exactly are the core areas that we hold in common? There are several ways to approach this. The Standards recently developed by the Commission of Professors of Adult Education provide a starting point to name the common issues. These Standards outline the core areas that graduate students should master. Extrapolating from the Standards we can see some areas of commonality that concern all adult educators. These include: adult learning theory; leadership and administration issues; diversity and globalization issues; sociocultural forces shaping adult education; and issues related to program planning and policy-making.

The strength of AAACE lies in the possibility that different groups with different concerns and different contexts can find a space to dialog about central concerns. But how exactly can this be accomplished? The AAACE Annual Conference and publications expose members to these issues and debates and frame them in contexts other than their own. This process invites us to reflect on our own circumstances in a different way. It is in searching for shared meaning and commonalities that the true shape of adult education can begin to emerge. The aim is a richer understanding of their circumstances; research that cuts across different occupational contexts; and discussions among practitioners about the central implications for both policy and practice. But collaboration is challenging among such a broad spectrum of adult education stakeholders—each with a keen sense of identity and worldview developed around the specialized populations they serve.

This issue of collaboration, then, is both a strength and a limitation.

Paradoxically, our broad vision for the future has been limiting us to the painstaking dialog to define the field and together plan meaningful activities—not unlike the formative debates within the American Association for Adult Education (AAAE) in 1926. Then, as now, the Association was grappling with the changing definitions of adult education, what it should do and what its central vision should be. Concomitantly, disagreements over this central vision exacerbated relationships among core constituents and led to a freezing of positions that have had ramifications to the present day. For example, AAAE defined adult education as an essentially broad, non-vocational and non-remedial, effort. Thus, workplace learning in all of its incarnations and basic education were not to be included under the adult education umbrella. In effect, basic and vocational education were isolated from adult education, with significant and long-lasting ramifications for shaping the field

and the Association. In sum, defining the meaning of adult education as an umbrella field of sorts and the role of AAACE as an umbrella association for adult educators is an on-going, and potentially acrimonious one. But it need not be that way! As we approach the centennial of formation of the field, we take note that the motivations—and the art and science—of collaboration among diverse groups have come a long way.

As we look to the future, we highlight our exciting accomplishments made in the face of adversity. The Association is stable financially. The number of attendees at the conference has been doubling yearly. But we are still left with the question of what an Association like this can be for? Is it a policy advocate? Is it a center for research? Is it a facilitator among different more specific associations? Can it be all of these things? Finally, how much can an Association that relies entirely on the volunteer work of busy professionals do? How do we

maximize our abilities and maintain our sanity?

We invite you to think about the future with us.

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* The one remaining staff person, Clesther (Cle) Anderson has been with the Association for twenty years and has become the memory of AAACE.