AAACE Public Affairs Committee: A Policy Invocation

Introduction

In their broadest sense, public affairs have been an essential part of adult education since the field’s inception. Unfortunately, as the various aspects of public affairs become ever more influential in personal and professional life, knowledge of them remains low. This lack of knowledge thwarts abilities to effect social change on all levels. Moreover, current political polarization exacerbates the deficit, preventing relatively normal functioning of social processes including government. In an effort to counteract these conditions, AAACE has chartered the Public Affairs Committee for the purpose of infusing policy into the field of adult education, with the concomitant intent of revitalizing and prioritizing public affairs and related topics in the general education of adults.

Public Affairs and Other Terms

In most common definitions, the term Public Affairs has to do, in a general sense, with managing social and political issues, and, in a more focused sense, with the navigation of policy, which makes it appropriate for the name of the newly chartered AAACE committee and term for its function. Connected to this concept are various other terms, perhaps most prominent of which are Civics, Government, Politics, and Law. Referring again to more common and popular perceptions, Civics refers more to the rights and duties, or privileges and responsibilities, of citizens. While Government refers to the broadly recognized system by which a given society is managed or directed. Politics is the art or science of maneuvering to control how government operates. Law is a term in a narrow sense meaning the rules by which a society lives. Broadly defined, law can encompass all the previously mentioned terms, and the rest of the spectrum of related knowledge from which adults could benefit in various aspects of personal and professional life and society (See Law in Black’s Law Dictionary, 2019 and Law.com). However, law may be an imprudent term as it conjures unfavorable perceptions of mystery tending toward fear and loathing among those outside the legal field proper. For this reason, authoritative systems is perhaps a better approach to terminology – as it includes the meaning in all the above described terms and spectrum – and therefore will be used when treating its relation to adult education in general.

Historical and Current Context

Adult education has long claimed various aspects of authoritative systems education (e.g., civic, citizenship education, public affairs, and community-based education), as essential parts of the field. This notion makes sense for several reasons. Of course both authoritative systems and adult education have been parts of the United States since before the country’s inception (Boggs, 1991; Imel, 2012; Stubblefield & Keane, 1994), each permeating society at manifold levels for myriad purposes from maintaining the status quo to promoting social change (Heaney, 2000; Quigly, 2000; McAdams et al., 2004; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Scaros, 2008; Stubblefeild & Keane, 1994; Vago & Barkan, 2018). Both are imperfect and subject to causing certain inequities, such as perpetuating the dominant culture at the expense of other cultural groups.
These similarities are perhaps expected as authoritative systems education has been, and continues to be, a part of adult education. This kind of adult education has been instrumental in efforts to effect early political and civic stability as well as later momentous historical movements (Lander, 2004; Quigley, 2000; Stubblefield & Keane, 1994). Currently, involvement in authoritative systems for such purposes as exercising full citizenship, effecting social justice, and addressing large-scale societal, even global, issues is (or should be) a major concern of adult education (Imel, 2012; Gastil, 2004; Lander, 2004); and adult education faculty, staff and administrators in their myriad organizations deal with issues controlled by authoritative systems ranging from the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, to sexual harassment, to immigration (Boggs, 1991; Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982). Unfortunately, a general and gradual shift in the field’s perspective from action in social context to theory in psychological context (Heaney, 2000) has resulted in less imperative on people’s knowledge of authoritative systems by which they can best affect improvements on their lives. The 2010 Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education’s treatment of authoritative systems (choose a term) and adult education arguably tends toward the abstract. Indeed, within the handbook, the chapter that deals most directly and gives most attention to any part of the topic (Hill, 2010), is largely an academic (or theoretical) treatment, or mapping, of the field’s intersections with public policy processes. Moreover, in its most direct commentary, the chapter notes that “interrogation of policy trends . . . has been noticeably absent in the field” (p. 109), and that “[AAACE] has been criticized for its failure to engage in issues related to social policy formation . . .” (p. 108). The next most substantially treated term in the handbook arguably falling under the authoritative system umbrella is social justice. In its philosophical and brief historical treatment of the term, the chapter dedicated to this term notes that “within adult education, social justice seems confined to either theoretical discussions of social justice or descriptions of adult education programs that use social justice as one of their guiding principles” (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2010, p. 339). So increasingly distant has this and related terms become, that one chapter suggests those in the field must struggle with the question of whether adult education “. . . should remain true . . . to its legacy as a field devoted to education for social justice and democratic action” (Hansman & Mott, 2010, p. 21). As a final example, civic engagement, another term under the authoritative system umbrella, is treated in the handbook through the singular lens of sociological theory (Butterwick & Egan, 2010).

As authoritative systems and their effects continue to become more ubiquitous, affecting virtually every aspect of life, common knowledge of them remains low and has not kept up with this expansion and permeation (Carcasson & Sprain, 2012; Cavanagh, 2017; Gastil, 2004; Malin et al., 2017; Rowell, 2019). Regarding adults in general, civic participation has decreased in recent decades (Millard & Delander, 2014), arguably as a result of decreased reception of knowledge (Hayes & Lawless, 2015) and voting participation remains low among eligible voters, in federal elections fluctuating between 45% and 63% over the past seventy years (Ballotpedia 2018, Bureau of the Census, 1991; Statistica, 2020). Worsening this situation is the recent political polarization of U.S. citizens and their representative parties (Hutchens et al., 2019; Kim, 2017; McLaughlin, 2018; Simas et al., 2020), which thwarts effective functioning of authoritative systems (Carcasson & Sprain, 2012; Kim, 2017; Shaker, 2012) and hinders the ability of society to adapt, evolve, thrive, or even survive.
This situation of low knowledge, lack of involvement and polarization of the masses has numerous causes. Among the more prominently noted are the 1987 repeal of the Fairness Doctrine, which, enacted in 1949, required broadcasts of important controversial issues to give reasonable opportunities for the expression of opposing viewpoints (Hentoff, 2015; Clogston, 2016), and the expanding prominence of the internet and the news personalization used by information and social media providers (Hutchens et al., 2019; Lafrance, 2017; Tewksbury & Riles, 2015). The repeal of the fairness doctrine paved the way for partisan broadcasting outlets (Hentoff, 2015; Clogston, 2016), and personalized news algorithms ensure each person gets internet news and information on issues from one perspective (Hutchens et al., 2019; Etman & Usher, 2018; Lafrance, 2017; Tewksbury & Riles, 2015). Some argue that the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine was beneficial as its enactment only served to dampen the dissemination of issues for fear of lawsuits and loss of broadcast licensure (Hentoff, 2015), and that the internet has less influence than most assert (Boxwell et al., 2017). Notwithstanding, one remedy for the current lethargy and polarization is simple and apparent: education.

The AAACE Public Affairs Committee

The AAACE Public Affairs Committee has been established to oversee “. . . the public affairs activities of the association . . .” (AAACE Policy and Procedures Manual, 2019, p. 47). Thus, it is, in effect, the public affairs arm of AAACE, and “an important means by which [association] members can bring their collective expertise to bear on issues of social [and professional] importance and inform public debate . . .” (p. 20). Among its charges are to “engage AAACE in the public domain” by “preparing and proposing position papers,” “processing position papers submitted by the general membership,” recommending for endorsement position papers issued by other organizations,” and “organizing an annual national public policy forum,” as well as “other outreach activities . . .” (p.20). Such papers and activities must be tempered so as to not jeopardize AAACE’s organizational not-for-profit, non-partisan, tax-exempt status by substantial political or lobbying activities (Advocacy, n.d.; Exemption Requirements, 2020). With this in mind, the AAACE Public Affairs Committee would like to encourage its members and affiliates to submit policy papers on various aspects of the myriad facets of the field to include (but certainly not limited to) adult basic education, workforce development, human resource development, higher education, leadership development, military education, continuing education and professional development, community-based learning and social mobilization.

Policy Papers

The papers submitted to the Public Affairs Committee must contain no more than 3,000 words of content (excluding references). These papers must treat topics of social and professional relevance and importance within the scope of the AAACE mission, and be written in inclusive language readily understandable by the general public; they should not posit positions so strongly subjective or particular as to threaten AAACE’s 501(c)(3) tax exempt status – examples would be endorsement of a particular political candidate or recommending specific action regarding a piece of legislation. Papers must include (1) a clearly stated purpose and rationale, (2) an explanation of the importance and relevance of the treated issue to Adult and
Continuing Education, (3) an explanation of the treated issue’s relevance to the general public, and (4) when appropriate, a brief overview of pertinent supporting research or documentation. Submitted papers must be accompanied by a separate statement regarding the desired impact of the paper, names of the authors, and recommendations for distribution and collaboration to maximize the desired impact. Submitted papers, including those prepared by committee members, will go through a tiered review process to ensure the propriety of issues presented (to include the position taken and relevance to AAACE), the accuracy of content, and the correctness of style and format. Papers successfully completing the Public Affairs Committee review process will be forwarded to the AAACE Board of Directors with a recommendation of approval. Members will be able to see detailed guidelines and instructions and submit papers online through AAACE’s website.

The Broader Effect

The immediate hope is that through these efforts adult education practitioners become more informed and involved in issues that affect their field and learners, and thus increasingly active in affecting equitable change for the improvement of the overall social condition. The general vision is that such efforts, which begin by providing examples of rationally and responsibly exposing issues of import, ultimately achieve effects in the general adult population by way of increasing amounts of authoritative systems knowledge in various adult learning experiences thereby producing informed adults empowered to advocate for change in their own interests. The ultimate goal is a better society.

Conclusion

Recognizing the deficit of awareness and activity concerning public affairs in the field of adult education and authoritative systems in the general adult population, AAACE has established the Public Affairs Committee in an effort to reinvigorate discussions of policy and policy development in the field of adult education. The committee will do this by developing its own position papers and accepting such papers from members and affiliate organizations for public dissemination, and facilitating an annual public policy forum. Its members encourage participation in these activities to maximize their impact in the overall vision of improving the field in particular and society in general.
References

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