



# **Theory and Practice in the Study of Adult Education**

## The Epistemological Debate

Edited by  
**BARRY P. BRIGHT**



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This book is dedicated to the efforts  
and wisdom of its contributors:

Paul F. Armstrong  
Stephen D. Brookfield  
Colin Griffin  
R.W.K. Paterson  
and Robin S. Usher

## CONTRIBUTORS

**Paul F. Armstrong** Research Evaluation Officer, London Borough of Haringey, Education Service; formerly Lecturer in Adult Education and Sociology, School of Adult and Continuing Education, University of Hull. Recently completed two years' secondment as Research Officer with Further Education Unit, London. Author of many articles and chapters in journals and edited books in adult education.

**Barry P. Bright** Lecturer in Psychology and Adult Education, School of Adult and Continuing Education, University of Hull; author of a monograph on adult learning and development, an article on adult education epistemology; contributor to several national and international conferences in adult education.

**Stephen D. Brookfield** Professor of Higher and Adult Education, Teachers' College, University of Columbia, New York City. Serves on editorial boards of Adult Education Quarterly (USA), Studies in Continuing Education (Australia), and the Canadian Journal for Studies in Adult Education. His books include Adult Learners, Adult Education and the Community, Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning, Learning Democracy, Developing Critical Thinkers and Training Educators of Adults.

**Colin Griffin** Tutor at Hillcroft College, Surrey; part-time tutor at the University of London Extra-mural Department; Associate Lecturer in the Department of Educational Studies, University of Surrey. Author of Curriculum Theory in Adult and Lifelong Education (Croom Helm, 1983) and Adult Education as Social Policy (Croom Helm, 1987).

**Ronald W.K. Paterson** Senior Lecturer in Philosophy, School of Adult and Continuing Education, University of Hull. Author of Values, Education and the Adult (Routledge, 1979) and several articles in adult education journals.

**Robin S. Usher** Senior Lecturer in Adult Education, University of Southampton. Author and co-author of several articles in adult education journals, and co-author with I. Bryant of The Captive Triangle: Theory, Practice, and Research for Adult Education (Routledge, 1988).

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## **Chapter one**

### **INTRODUCTION: THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL IMPERATIVE**

**Barry P. Bright**

#### **BACKGROUND TO THE BOOK: A PERSONAL ANECDOTE**

The idea of this book first occurred to me at about 3.30 a.m. in the back of a motor home when travelling overland between Texas and Syracuse, New York State, in May 1986. I was part of the second contingent of British adult educators who were visiting America within the Kellogg UK-USA Adult Education Exchange programme. Having completed the first stage of my visit as the guest of Texas A and M University, I, and several colleagues from that university, were travelling to the Adult Education Research Conference in Syracuse. The overland trip, which took forty-eight hours' non-stop travelling, offered me a golden opportunity to experience American culture and landscape on a scale not available to most of the exchange fellows. Because of the richness of this experience, and the geographical vastness of America, I found myself unable to sleep and consequently began to muse upon my position in adult education in Britain, in comparison to that of my American counterparts. I was also worrying about the paper I was due to give at the Syracuse conference, which was concerned with the epistemological relationship between adult education and psychology. This paper was based on an earlier paper which had been published in 1985 and which was my first published paper in adult education. As a result of my limited exposure to American adult education, it did not appear that my American colleagues were very concerned with or interested in such epistemological issues in their teaching or research, hence my worries about the kind of reception my conference paper would get. On reflection, it also appeared that my colleagues in British

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adult education were not really interested in these kinds of issues either, although frequent informal discussion and comments did indicate an awareness of these problems and their impact upon professional activities. From these thoughts emerged the idea of an edited book on the epistemological status and nature of adult education. On my return to Britain I discussed the idea with Paul Armstrong, Ronald Paterson, and Colin Griffin, all of whom strongly supported it, and all agreed to contribute a chapter. Following this I approached Stephen Brookfield and Robin Usher, who also warmly welcomed the book and agreed to write a chapter each.

This, of course, is to summarize heavily a relatively drawn out process which involved many doubts and uncertainties over a protracted period of time. It may be pertinent to dwell on the real origin of the book, which lay in the circumstances surrounding the writing of my first published paper in adult education (Bright, 1985). The reason for this is that it may indicate in detailed professional terms the kind of problems I was experiencing within adult education, and how these came to be recognized as epistemological in character. These problems also forced me to question the true nature and definition of adult education.

I entered adult education more by accident than by intention. Having recently finished a degree in psychology as an adult student in 1981, I was unable to obtain a full-time teaching post or a funded research position, and consequently offered my services to Hull University's Department of Adult Education as an extra-mural part-time tutor, doing courses in developmental psychology. Shortly after this, in 1982, a full-time post for a psychologist became available. I applied, although, since I did not possess a PhD at that time and my experience of adult education was very limited, I doubted that I would be asked to attend for interview. However, because I had an academic interdisciplinary background (degrees in economics, psychology, and a postgraduate degree in town and country planning), and nearly ten years of professional experience in local government, and had demonstrated some degree of commitment and interest in adult education, I was deemed suitable and was offered the post. The duties, in addition to extra-mural work, included teaching on postgraduate courses in the study of adult education, and, more particularly, courses oriented to teaching and learning in the



adult context, about which I knew very little in the academic, formal sense. This is possibly a typical experience in Britain, since there are no undergraduate degree courses in the study of adult education.

My first two years (1982-4) studying and teaching adult education as a subject were profoundly frustrating both to myself and, I suspect, to my students. I read a representative sample of the relevant literature (e.g. Knowles, Knox, Brookfield and many others) in the teaching and learning of adults but quickly came to approach such reading with an apprehension that bordered on dread. The material seemed superficial in the welter of insignificant and marginal detail and, in other instances, the gross over-simplification of complex theories and perspectives. This superficiality was in stark contrast to what I had come to recognize in psychology as deep and thoroughly investigated knowledge, even accepting its limitations. In my teaching I adopted an orientation which was rooted in mainstream psychology and its theories, but used the literature within adult education as examples of the adult context for these theories. There appeared no other option, since all the literature seemed to indicate a thinly disguised - indeed, palpably obvious - adoption of a similar approach, but one which flattened and reduced the richness and highly textured quality of psychological knowledge. The students, although very hard-working and conscientious, often found great difficulty in grasping basic psychological concepts and issues and their relevance to adult education. Even allowing for the fact that none of the students possessed a degree in a social science subject, I was perplexed, since I had taken great care to pitch my teaching at a very broad and relatively simple level, using many examples from everyday life.

At this point I decided that there was a need to deepen adult education's understanding of psychological knowledge. However, I recognized that the only way this could be done was by offering a broader level and a more general frame of reference within which psychological theories and concepts could be located and interpreted, rather than by focusing upon some highly specific theory or concept. Again, the reason for this was the literature within adult education, which seemed to avoid the detail of psychological theories but, on the basic principles of those theories, produced an alarming and largely vacuous plethora of supposedly distinct adult educational tenets or applications, which often contradicted the principles of the original theories. What

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appeared to be needed was a clear statement of those original principles. I began working on a paper which was an attempt to locate theories of adult learning and development within the metaphysical models of mechanism and organicism, the two major models within psychology. After several months of attempting, but always failing, to find an appropriate form in which these models could be readily described and comprehended, I came to the conclusion that the problems experienced by students in relation to taught psychological knowledge would also be experienced by the teachers of adult education, including those who possessed a psychology degree. Respectable psychological knowledge would not fit into the simplified and readily digestible but superficial form common in adult education, and I was intuitively certain that colleagues, divorced from this level of complexity, would not find it readable or understandable. Imagine my frustration at recognizing the obvious but ignored and highly distorted dependence of adult education upon psychology, and my inability to remedy this (to some small extent) in a direct manner with respect to either students or their educators. A further source of exasperation was the fact that the study of adult education in Britain takes place within universities, the archetypal institutions of academic learning and scholarship.

At this point I was forced to abandon my original intention for the paper and was thrown into an intense period of re-evaluation in which the epistemological relationship between adult education and psychology was fundamentally questioned, which, in turn, led me to question the nature and status of adult education itself. The overwhelming conclusion appeared to be that adult education could not be regarded as epistemologically distinct from psychology and the major social science disciplines, and that attempts to render it as distinct in theoretical knowledge terms were bound to fail, and, indeed, had already failed. I therefore suggested that, although its epistemological base, as far as 'theoretical' knowledge was concerned, had to be regarded as residing within the major disciplines, adult education could define itself in 'practical' terms which would bestow a degree of distinctiveness upon its activity and study.

From the original position of intending to write a paper concerning substantive psychological knowledge, I was forced to write a paper which was effectively concerned with epistemology and the epistemological structure, status

and definition of adult education. This was a direct result of my earlier teaching and research efforts and their attendant failure. Although my relative lack of experience within adult education (at that time two years) was a cause for considerable hesitancy on my part in writing and submitting the final paper for publication, it was probably an advantage, since I had not become socialized into the normally accepted epistemological chaos and confusion represented by adult education. Also, having recently finished a degree in a major discipline (psychology), my expectations were, and still are, very much influenced by what I regarded as a more fundamental and intrinsic approach to the definition and discovery of knowledge.

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The point of referring to this anecdote in some detail is that it does demonstrate the epistemological conflict, in practical and professional terms, between adult education and its source disciplines and, more important, suggests an imperative need for educators to be explicitly aware of the knowledge base they are using. This awareness may not take the form of a rigid acceptance of one particular view of knowledge or epistemological definition of adult education. On the contrary, the first academically legitimate step in approaching this awareness is the recognition that epistemology itself is eclectic and contains many views and definitions of knowledge and their consequent definitions of education and adult education. For example, my 1985 paper was not categorically stating that adult education should be defined in either a 'theoretical' or a 'practical' manner, but was, rather, drawing attention to these as possible alternatives with consequent epistemological implications and problems, which it is the professional responsibility of adult education to recognize and determine with respect to itself. A 'blind' commitment to any one view or perspective is itself antithetical to a meaningful commitment, which can be defined by informed awareness. This seemed especially relevant in respect to university-level adult education and its educators, who, presumably and reasonably, can be expected to demonstrate an informed and critical perspective. Indeed, this suggestion can be applied to all 'educators', in that whatever view of knowledge is encapsulated and assumed within, and thereby determines,

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their professional activities, it demands an informed recognition. Too often, perhaps, educators make the false distinction between epistemological issues and the knowledge they use in their work. Emphasizing the relevance of the latter and the irrelevance of the former amounts to a tacit acceptance of one view of knowledge to the total exclusion of other views. The earlier anecdote draws attention to the logical impossibility of this position in adult education, and the consequent necessity of recognizing the direct link between epistemology and the professional activity of educators. Alternative views of knowledge entail alternative definitions of educational practice, and thus have a direct bearing on the detailed structure and objective of professional practice.

This is, of course, precisely the objective and purpose of the present book, which attempts to offer a variety of perspectives concerning the definition of knowledge and their consequent definitions of education and adult education, in both epistemological and their associated professional terms. Whilst some may view this debate with apprehension, suspicion, or even derision, an additional objective of the book is the further development of adult education, which, it is suggested, cannot proceed in the absence of such a debate. Indeed, all the contributors to the book suggest, from their different positions and perspectives, that the absence of this debate has produced the unfortunate situation adult education now represents. More of the same is regarded as regressive, ill-advised and unprofessional. It is only by engaging with, and considering, the views presented in this volume that a deeper and more fundamental understanding of adult education, its epistemology, and professional activity will be achieved. This is a necessary requisite for the suggested need for an improvement in, or redefinition of, the activity represented by adult education.

Of course, such engagement with and consideration of these differing views may not occur easily. Epistemology is complex and often abstract. This is especially the case with an interdisciplinary area such as adult education, which has hitherto assumed and therefore avoided, rather than examined, the nature of its complex epistemology. In addition, the very existence of the epistemological problems, as outlined by each of the contributors and the manner with which these relate to professional practice, prevent or obscure recognition of those problems. In this sense, the

problems take on a self-fulfilling and stubborn character, which requires a considerable degree of re-evaluation, often at a personal professional level, in order to penetrate the comfortable, but misplaced, sense of professional security and identity.

As indicated, the book focuses upon the study of adult education as a subject in which university postgraduate degrees are awarded. Although not receiving formal professional recognition and certification in Britain, such courses typically involve teaching the teachers of adults in a multitude of institutional and vocationally oriented settings. As a subject adult education typically offers courses in the teaching and learning of adults, the organization and management of adult educational institutions and providing agencies, the history of adult education, community adult education, adult education and social change, the philosophy of adult education, continuing professional and in-service education, the nature of the curriculum and the developing curricula within adult education, and adult education in developing countries. Adult education as a subject must not be confused with extra-mural adult education, which comprises day and evening courses for the general public in a variety of social science, humanities, and natural science subjects. Extra-mural adult education could form a specialized topic within the study of adult education and, indeed, the study of adult education could be used as the content of an extra-mural course. However, the two are not synonymous. Adult education does, however, bear an obviously close relationship to the subject of education itself, and as several of the following chapters indicate (e.g. Paterson, Armstrong, Usher), all the issues discussed have a direct relevance for interdisciplinary educational areas and activity. In this sense, the present book has greater significance and relevance than its declared focus upon the study of adult education would indicate.

### **STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK**

The structure of the book and the sequencing of chapters are based on an attempt to provide the reader with a logical progression through the differing views of the contributors. Although difficult and fraught with exceptions and qualifications, the underlying rationale governing their arrangement was a perceived continuum, from those views

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suggesting a close and logically necessary relationship between adult education and the major disciplines, to those which suggested the opposite of this, the two ends of this continuum being represented by Paterson (chapter two) and Griffin (chapter six) respectively. Brookfield (chapter seven) represents a problem in this respect, since, although he adopts a position close to that of Paterson, his major focus is upon cross-cultural, transatlantic issues. The impact and relevance of these issues were regarded as better maximized if Brookfield's chapter was read in the context of the other contributors' views, which suggested its location subsequent to them.

Another structural theme within the book, and one which is largely but not totally achieved within its present form, is the distinction between a specific discipline focus and a general focus upon the social sciences. Thus Paterson, Bright, and Armstrong consider epistemological issues in the study of adult education from the perspective of individual disciplines (i.e. philosophy (chapter two), psychology (chapter three), and sociology (chapter five), respectively), whilst Usher, Brookfield, and Griffin adopt a more general epistemological remit and perspective. The only exceptions to this theme in the structure of the book are Armstrong's and Usher's chapters. Because Armstrong, in contrast to Usher, agrees with Griffin's ideological criticism of the conventional disciplines and thus adopts a more negative view of them within adult education, it was felt that his chapter should follow Usher's, in conformity with the previously mentioned objective of placing the chapters in order of disagreement with the role and status of the discipline model of knowledge within adult education.

## **SUMMARY OF CHAPTERS**

Chapter two (Paterson) considers the current and suggested future relationship between adult education and the discipline of philosophy. It represents a cogent and tightly argued analysis in which it is suggested that adult education and many of its concepts and statements stand in need of logical criticism. Some of the concepts (e.g. 'praxis', the social construction theory of knowledge) that are criticized in this chapter represent the interpretive basis and framework of other chapters (e.g. Griffin, Armstrong, and Usher). The logical necessity of adult education's dependence upon

philosophy and the latter's major contribution to epistemological validity in terms of logical criticism are strongly evident. Adult education's current lack of adherence to this epistemological method poses major questions concerning the legitimacy of its activity as a branch of education and the status of adult educators as 'educated'. The chapter concludes with an outline suggestion of six models which prescribe adult education's relationship to philosophy consistent with the approach adopted.

Bright's chapter (chapter three) adopts a somewhat similar approach but in the context of adult education's relationship to psychology. The chapter examines the issues of the origin, selection, and status of psychological knowledge within adult education, and suggests that the latter is guilty of epistemological vandalism with respect to all three issues. It is suggested that adult education effectively ignores the psychological origin of much of the knowledge it draws upon and its vandalism (e.g. false dichotomies, high levels of abbreviation, conceptual inaccuracies) of this knowledge. Similarly, adult education ignores the selection problem created by the high degree of epistemological overlap between psychology and adult education. A further theme within the chapter is the view that adult education exploits its dependence upon psychology in the manner of legitimizing its own existence whilst simultaneously reneging upon the epistemological imperatives of this dependence. This is also the case, it is suggested, with respect to all of its source disciplines. Although accepting this view within a 'theoretical' definition of adult education, Bright also suggests that a 'practical' definition is possible and that this does not necessarily contradict the use of theoretical knowledge. Whether a theoretical or practical definition of adult education is adopted, Bright suggests the inevitable use of theoretical, discipline-based knowledge and the epistemological responsibilities this entails. Within a practical approach, this knowledge would be complemented by informal theory residing at the practitioner level. Bright also draws attention to the epistemologically and professionally contradictory position in which the subject specialist in adult education is currently placed.

The theme of informal practitioner knowledge is taken up and discussed in more detail by Usher (chapter four). The conventional discipline model is regarded as inappropriate for education, since the latter is essentially concerned with

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localized practice involving heterogeneous situations and contexts, which contain value judgements and operational differences. The conventional discipline model is criticized on the grounds of its claim to objectivity and its generalized and universal character, which cannot be directly 'applied' to any particular situation. Other problems include inter- and intradisciplinary eclecticism, which render impossible the selection of any one theoretical approach. Praxis is suggested as the only realistic approach to education, this involving the dialectical relationship between situated practice and informal theory. Formal theoretical knowledge is also regarded in this dialectical manner such that it, too, can be regarded as occurring within localized contexts and their moral value and methodological assumptions. Within this 'praxical' definition of education, a role for formal discipline-based knowledge is accepted as both a source of metaphor and sensitizing concepts for the interpretation of informal knowledge and as an example of the dialectical relationship between theory and practice.

Chapter five (Armstrong) focuses upon the relationship between adult education and sociology. Within this, Armstrong discusses the problematical history of professional education courses. Although emphasizing generic teacher education, its relevance and applicability to adult education are obvious. Armstrong examines the related issue of whether sociology is relevant within education and, if so, which sociology should be included. The latter invokes the interdisciplinary eclecticism within sociology and the question of left-wing bias in some of its theories. Within this approach the relevance of sociology is referred to as offering a useful perspective on the activity of educators. However, doubts are also raised concerning the possibility of teaching a complex subject at a lower level to students inexperienced in relation to social science subjects. Similarly, the possibility of sociology being reduced to a technical educational instrument within a given social system, rather than it raising questions about that system and thereby contradicting the objectives of sociology, is also suggested. In addition, Armstrong quotes one view which suggests the incompatibility between a critical thinking mode and the requirements and operations of practical teaching. The question of left-wing bias within sociology Armstrong regards as due to the false perception of sociologists and educators, suggesting that sociology can be better regarded as right-wing rather than left-wing. Claims



for a humble eclecticism (whether or not they exclude supposedly left-wing sociological theories) he regards as fundamentally dishonest. The chapter concludes with the view that the questions of whether to include, and if so, which, sociology, can be regarded as 'red herrings' which, although raising important and interesting issues, essentially lie outside the practical nature of education. Like Usher, Armstrong suggests the need for a 'praxical' approach which includes a role for conventional discipline-based knowledge but which will 'cut across' the disciplines. Although Armstrong does not discuss this in detail, he does refer to the ideological nature of conventional knowledge and the manner in which it maintains unequal social and economic relations in society.

Griffin (chapter six) invokes critical theory as the interpretive basis for his claim that adult education directly reflects the ideological assumptions, methods, and content of the conventional disciplines. Like Usher, Griffin defines knowledge in a context-dependent and dialectical manner. However, unlike Usher, he extends this context to the cultural and political level. The chapter suggests that conventional knowledge, as represented by the disciplines, conveys a fundamentally unreal and deceptive perception of knowledge in its divorce from ideological content, as manifested in the false divisions between objectivity/subjectivity, fact/value, theory/practice, pure/applied, and instrumental/intrinsic dimensions. All knowledge is regarded as a function of the political context within which it occurs, and whose social and economic relations it legitimizes, maintains, and perpetuates. Griffin suggests the adoption of a 'praxical' dialectical approach to adult education in which current concepts and theories within it would be subject to ideological scrutiny, to discover the particular professional manifestation of the deeper social and economic interests they serve.

Chapter seven (Brookfield) comprises a cross-cultural analysis of the epistemology of adult education in Britain and the United States. The chapter suggests that, although there is historical evidence indicating the previously strong presence of political and philosophical debate within American adult education, currently this debate is present only within British adult education. Brookfield places this conclusion within a comparative cultural perspective which includes the greater American emphasis upon pragmatism and consensus relative to Britain. The latter is regarded as