

# Chapter 1

## Historical Evolution of Adult Education in America: The Impact of Institutions, Change, and Acculturation

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter focuses on the history of adult education in the United States, but the implication is that the formation of the field is dependent upon the social, economic, and political needs, resources, and priorities of a given time and place. This is true anywhere in the world as was demonstrated in modern history such as the role of adult education in the post- World War II reconstruction in Europe and Japan, or more recently, in Southern Africa with the dramatic changes after the fall of apartheid (officially in South Africa and symbolically in other countries). For example, in the past ten years, universities in Southern African countries have consolidated Departments of Adult Education with Departments of Community Development in recognition of the symbiotic and reciprocal relationship between the two fields of study during this time of reconstruction of inclusive participatory democracy. The role of various institutions and the influence on the direction and resources for adult education are explored. The role of change and acculturation is also visited.*

### INTRODUCTION

Throughout the ages, lifelong learning allowed civilizations to discover and develop solutions to the various problems of survival and existence. Communities were able to develop more sophis-

ticated defense against aggression; respond to natural phenomena; contemplate and arbitrate religious and spiritual questions; provide a forum for social fellowship and entertainment; pass on the methods and appreciation of various arts and cultural legacies; share craft and trade skills with succeeding generations; promote critical thinking; and resolve other adult challenges in

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scientific, political, economic, artistic, technical or other areas. Long before the Common Era, revered philosophers shared their wisdom with willing adult learners through discourse and later through transcription of the wisdom. Discourse and contemplation of Eastern philosophers such as Confucius, Mencius or Lao Tzu or Western philosophers such as Aristotle, Plato or Socrates provided the opportunity for the development of thought among adults around the world. Later, as classic philosophical and religious texts became available, those who were literate in Greek, Latin, or Hebrew could read not only the classic Greek texts and the Hebrew Bible (including the Torah), but also, later, the Christian Bible and share their discoveries and reflections with other adults in informal study groups. In other parts of the world, the Bhagavad Gita, the Qur'an and Buddhist discourses (as they were adapted to Japanese, Chinese or Southeast Asian traditions) were available for adult learners. As the history of lifelong learning is traced, it can be noted that while some content and methods are unchanged (discourse and reflection), other topics and distribution methods evolved to meet the changing needs of societies. Brown and Isaacs (2005) note that conversation is a "primary means for discovering what we care about, sharing knowledge, imagining the future, and acting together to both survive and thrive" (pp.18-19).

By reviewing the history of adult education, one will notice that the content and methods will vary with the values, needs, and resources specific to time and place. One will also notice a divide between formal (academic) and informal adult learning. As the economy progressed from an agricultural economy, through an industrial economy, to the current information and service economy (Toffler, 1971, 1984), as well as the challenges of globalization with the democratization of technology, information, and finance (Friedman, 1999, 2005), the needs of adults to stay current became a lifelong learning pursuit. Furthermore,

there is a constant trend for formalizing the informal processes, such as how apprenticeships and certifications have evolved into much more formal and uniform or standardized processes. Historically, there have been protectors, sponsors, and advocates for advancement of adult learning, whether it was the monks protecting documents in the middle ages, philanthropists throughout the ages promoting advances in the arts and sciences and training efforts, or advocates for needed adult educational services in times of crisis.

Tracing the evolution of a segment of adult education over time, such as distance learning, provides an example of how methods and content evolve over time and in place. The epistle method of the early Christian era to evangelize parts of Europe and the Middle East provided an early example of distance learning. Handwritten correspondence between scientists around the world in later centuries to share research findings and advance science provides another example of distance learning. Growth in trade routes connecting the East and the West resulted in an unprecedented exchange of new information and advancement of knowledge. Improved postal service and new technology, such as the introduction of public television, advanced correspondence courses in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The impact of technological advances including the internet and interactive teleconferencing by the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have brought previously unimaginable opportunities to distance learning. As technological resources change the terrain, some things remain critical, such as the role of person-to-person generative conversation to promote creative problem solving which will be discussed later in this chapter. Content areas and resources are constantly evolving to meet new needs. This broad brush history will provide the reader with a sense of the breadth and depth of the evolving field of adult learning in the past four centuries in the United States. Along with a history of how adults learned, there will also

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