



Is a Good Adult Education Worker a Christian?

by Marilyn Childs

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During January, while many of us were on holidays, a furore broke out in the national press. Some Christian charitable organisations, which have taken over much of the provision of employment services to the unemployed, were insisting on recruiting employees who are Christians, or willing to support Christian values. A spokesman for Wesley Mission went as far as asserting that the best workers are Christian workers. The Minister for Employment, Tony Abbott, himself a Christian, supported the right to choose employees on the basis of religious orientation.

The furore has important implications for those of us involved in the professional development of adult education workers. Many students enrolled in the Bachelor of Adult Education work in the employment services sector. Such a connection was established in the late 1980s during the period of the Accord. At that time the Federal Labor Government focused on training. This was seen as a long-term solution for rising unemployment and labour market dislocation caused by the restructure of the Australian economy. Training services were provided at first by public TAFE providers, and then increasingly, as competitive tendering was aggressively pursued, by so-called 'private providers'. A large pool of workers, often without educational qualifications, was attracted to contract employment in the newly created employment services sector. Adult education qualifications were established as the appropriate professional standard. (This has since been eroded to vocational qualifications, but that is another story). Approximately two thirds of our students work at least part of their working hours in this industry.

Adult education degree programs are focused on responding to the adult education labour market, and all our students are mature-aged. At the same time, we are passionate about developing students' critical capabilities. How this is pursued varies across degree programs in Australia, but it invariably involves advocating access and equity, contesting disadvantage and promoting social justice. It commonly includes a critical examination of race, class and gender. Such

commitments clash with the notion that a particular religious orientation makes for a better kind of worker. The 'development of Christian values' is nowhere to be found amongst our subject outcomes.

Our degree program has responded to other changes in the employment services sector, and in education and training more generally. Corporatisation, the notion of the entrepreneurial educator, outcomes-based funding, competency-based training and IT, have all shaped what we teach, as well as how we speak and think about what we teach. How far do we go in ensuring our student's employability? Where do we draw the line in the educational sands of change?

In reality, employment discrimination on the grounds of religion joins a long list of other forms of workplace problems faced by adult education workers. Lack of security, poor wages and conditions, ever-changing government policy, unimaginative and at times exploitative management practices and poor access to on-the-job training, have placed considerable pressure on educational work.

This much is clear. At UWS, Nepean, we will not be amending our course to advocate Christian ethics for educators as an essential competency for employment. We will continue to adopt broad and critical approaches to the question of ethical praxis. Asking educators to be critical practitioners in this climate is a challenge, but it continues to be a worthy one. We must also examine religious intolerance, assumptions and stereotyping. The dismantling of public institutions has occurred at the same time that unions have failed to respond to casualisation, and governments have eroded union power. Educational workers face unprecedented and dynamic tensions between the threats and opportunities that characterise educational work. This is the case whether they work in classrooms, employment service programs and training departments, or in TAFEs and community colleges. It is now essential for university and professional development programs to include dialogue about the rights of educational workers, wherever they work.

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