



Finding our many founders: seeking the oral history of Australian adult and community education

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Adult Learning Commentary, Number 33, 29 November 2000

The Australian adult and community education sector has been a quiet achiever across the last century. Australians from many walks of life have developed education services outside of school settings as one way of contributing to the development of their community. And yet we know very little about this rich and diverse group and what drove them to begin a service or provide a new perspective within an existing service—they are what Sheila Rowbotham has called “hidden from history”.

Last weekend, at the ALA national conference held in Canberra, a small group of people who share an interest in reclaiming this history came together to plan an oral history project that will capture the lives and stories of the women and men who have been significant in some way in their support of adult learning. We believe that many ALA members around the country will know of at least one person whose work deserves to be recorded. They may be an Indigenous educator, a first generation Australian educator, a neighbourhood house founder, a prison educator, a literacy worker, an evening college provider, a youth worker—the list is almost endless. They will not necessarily be famous but they will be ordinary people who have done extraordinary things.

Collecting oral history can be understood as part of a wider egalitarian movement in which the voice of the ordinary person gains its rightful place. The stories of every man/every woman provide a challenge to the elite famous man histories and have been described as ‘celebratory’ history. Alternatively oral history can be seen as a form of ‘revisionist’ history in which we collect stories in order to correct a flawed version of the past that has written certain groups out of our history books. For example the work of women educators here is often categorised as simply an extension of their ‘natural’ nurturing role. This is how their work has at times been seen. However oral history holds further radical potential as it can reveal how we compose or construct our memories, using the meaning frameworks available from a particular place in time and culture. Over time, we may ‘re-member’ our

experiences as public meanings change, illustrating that there is a constant negotiation between public and private memory. Thus oral histories are rich in a number of ways.

So what exactly will be involved in the collection of an oral history? The project team will develop a set of protocols for permission, taping, transcribing and the like, and the National Library of Australia has agreed to house and catalogue the transcripts that are produced. The actual style of oral history interview will primarily depend on the person who is to be interviewed. Some people are most comfortable telling their story as a narrative account which begins at a certain point and unfolds from there; others will prefer a series of questions whilst another group will prefer a dialogue in which they share their memories in response to the interviewer’s own experiences. As a base-line we will be interested in the how, what, where and, most importantly, why of the experience of adult and community education in another time and place.

We hope that many ALA members will consider joining this project. Is there someone that you believe has been ‘hidden from history’? Is there a service in your area that is significant and you have a passion to seek out its founders? Do you have a story to tell yourself? If the answer is yes, please feel free to email me at the address below. In the longer term hope to have a page on the ALA web-site, so watch that space—but most of all do consider how you might contribute to the important project of “finding our founders”.