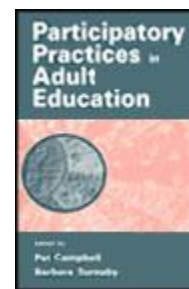

Review

Participatory Practices in Adult Education

edited by Pat Campbell and Barbara Burnaby Mahwah, NJ;
Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.; 2001, 318 pp. US
\$34.50.



The concluding chapter of this collection might have provided the title. In “The Many Faces of Participatory Adult Education,” co-editor Barbara Burnaby starts by explaining her personal struggle to understand some educational labels such as participatory “that seem to emanate out of a (set of) core principle(s) but that do not seem to have boundaries and are not as easy to define” (p.307). She then works back from the thirteen chapters to try and tease out the distinguishing characteristics of the diverse practices that have been called “participatory.”

Acknowledging that she and co-editor Pat Campbell did not set out to demonstrate particularly representative participatory education practices in North America, they put the book together simply by calling on colleagues who they felt were engaged in the practice. This disclaimer may be a touch disingenuous on Burnaby’s part, since she and Campbell included some of the best-known practitioners in various branches of adult education—ABE, ESL, literacy, community education, workplace, university and prisons. Among the contributors are Deborah Barndt, Virginia Sauve, Jenny Horsman, Mary Norton, Sue Folinsbee, Elsa Auerbach, Andrea Nash, to name only a few of those most familiar to Canadians. Every chapter, told as a story of practice and reflection in a different context, adds valuable perspective and “helps to firm up the concept”, as Burnaby suggests. One of the defining characteristics she discovers among the examples is the presence of activities and the relationships that learners must change. Many of the situations involve a move from positions of marginalization to ones of greater decision-making or control. Because “disparities in degrees of control exist in every situation,” she suggests that we probably overlook many forms of participatory education all around us. She notes the questions that arise about kinds and degrees of participation, about who initiates and who tells the stories, and about the complex relationships among facilitators, participants and organizations. She concludes that all the examples demonstrate that giving over or sharing control and responsibility for learning with the learners is a “potent force” and that participatory education “has much more potential than is being realized.”

What she does not explore fully is the extent to which a facilitator or teacher has to be pre-disposed to the philosophy or introduced through teacher training or in-service professional development to the possibilities of participatory education. It will take some serious change in program funding and policy before such practice becomes mainstream.

By showing so many faces of reflective participatory practice, this book could certainly inspire a move in this direction. [LS]

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