

Volume 28 Issue 1

cjsae

the canadian journal for the study of adult education

la revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes

rcééa

Contemporary Understandings Of Adult Education  
And Learning In Public Libraries In Canada And  
Britain

Katherine Sanford and Darlene E. Clover

*The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education/  
La revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes*  
Editor-in-Chief: Donovan Plumb  
[www.cjsae-rceea.ca](http://www.cjsae-rceea.ca)

28,1 February/février 2016, 49–63  
ISSN 1925-993X (online)

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L'Association canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes  
[www.casae-aceea.ca](http://www.casae-aceea.ca)

# REDISCOVER, REAWAKEN, RENEW: THE POTENTIAL ROLE OF SPIRITUAL RETREAT CENTRES IN ENVIRONMENTAL ADULT EDUCATION

**Katherine Sanford**

University of Victoria

**Darlene E. Clover**

University of Victoria

## Abstract

*Public libraries have long been considered important spaces of adult education and learning. However, major social changes over the past few decades, and the impact these have had on libraries' work, have received little attention. Our three-year cross-national study of libraries in Canada and Britain explored how librarians navigate the discourse of adult education and learning and understand its place and value in the institution and society. Findings show that technology, both positively and negatively, drives the pedagogical directions, particularly in Britain, and there is a schism between the values and identities of younger and seasoned librarians. However, we also found that despite age and political and technological pressures, librarians still predominantly view themselves as educators and position the library as a critical cultural space for aesthetic, social, and collective learning and engagement.*

## Résumé

*Les bibliothèques publiques sont considérées depuis longtemps comme des espaces importants pour l'éducation et de l'apprentissage des adultes. Cependant, les grands changements sociaux au cours des dernières décennies, ainsi que leur influence sur le fonctionnement des bibliothèques, reçoivent peu d'attention. Notre étude transnationale des bibliothèques du Canada et de la Grande-Bretagne, une étude de trois ans, explore comment les bibliothécaires naviguent dans le discours de l'éducation et de l'apprentissage des adultes et comprennent sa place et sa valeur dans l'institution et la société. Les résultats montrent que la technologie oriente, à la fois de manière positive et négative, les directions pédagogiques, en particulier en Grande-Bretagne, et qu'il y a un schisme des valeurs et identités entre les bibliothécaires plus jeunes et expérimentés. Pourtant, nous constatons également que, malgré l'âge et les pressions politiques et technologiques, les bibliothécaires se considèrent toujours*

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*principalement comme éducateurs et ils considèrent la bibliothèque comme un espace culturel critique pour l'apprentissage et l'engagement esthétiques, sociaux et collectifs.*

## Introduction

Today's fast-paced and increasingly technological world relies on people having a place where they can access up-to-date, reliable information and opportunities for ongoing adult learning. Moreover, the near exponential increase in social problems in countries such as Canada and Britain, the focuses of our study, requires that we provide more spaces for adults to engage in critical education. Libraries, although they began as elitist and exclusionary institutions (Lerner, 2009), have consistently played a variety of pedagogical roles. They have been reliable sources of information and spaces for non-formal education and informal learning. Kent (1978) once referred to them as one of the most fundamental adult education institutions. But today public libraries are not immune to prevailing ideologies and conservative political agendas. Despite their critical pedagogical importance in adults' lives, libraries in Britain (and England in particular), are being closed at an alarming rate as funding is severely cut in the name of austerity. Canadian public libraries have not suffered the same fate, but they are under pressure to provide more educational services and respond to the diverse needs of their users.

We believe that we need to give renewed attention to the important role of libraries in democratic society and the challenges they face. Libraries, as educative formal and informal spaces, need to be protected as significant sites of adult education. Yet our content analysis of over 50 years of publications in the field of adult education showed few contemporary studies in this area (Clover, Sanford & Jayme, 2010).

Our research begins to fill this gap. This article reports on our three-year cross-national qualitative study that explored the roles of librarians and libraries in today's society, both perceived and manifested in practice, to provide meaningful educational experiences to adults, and identifies the lived tensions/contradictions within these institutions.

## Historical Perspective and Literature Review

Historically, the library was a collection of books used for reading or study, and libraries have existed since ancient times in all "civilized" societies, playing a vital role as sites of important business, legal, historical, and religious records of a civilization (Lerner, 2009). Public libraries are now more likely to be acknowledged as indispensable parts of community life, promoters of literacy, providers of a wide range of reading for all ages, and centres for community information services. Although, historically, many libraries were opened to the public, the practice encountered considerable opposition in the 19th century (Lerner, 2009).

In the midst of a growing push for universal suffrage in the United Kingdom and Canadian colonies in the early 1800s, campaigns emerged to create a system of public libraries. However, the road to their creation was not easy, and the middle and upper classes were not convinced that they should pay for services to be used mainly by working classes. Despite some resistance, the Public Libraries Act became law in Canada in 1850, and it has served the general population since that time.

Blewitt and Gambles (2010) wrote of the United Kingdom, “In the nineteenth century [libraries] were perceived by elites as a means of reconciling capital and labour and educating the working classes away from the radicalism promoted by social reformers and political revolutionaries” (p. 36). But scholars remind us that as the world changed, “knowing how to learn for oneself, how and where to locate information, how to evaluate, how to apply and how to use information” (Vainstein, 1966, p. 20) became more important for citizens. The public library became increasingly more accessible, ubiquitous and “quite conceivably...the primary free public agency which could contribute positively to [adult] learning” (Brooks & Riech, 1974, p. 3). Some studies suggested that in the heady days of library development, librarians eagerly defined themselves as adult educators as much as collectors or processors of information and made active contributions to society (Adams, 2008; Kronus, 1973). For example, Irving (2015) uncovered the instrumental role women librarians played in the Antigonish Movement, an adult education movement that began to empower fishers in Nova Scotia.

Yet other historical and contemporary studies tell a different story. Steinbarger’s study in 1951 found a resistance among librarians to take on the role of adult educator; he concluded that “the public library as a social agency would probably never be able to help the community realize desirable avenues for social change until the librarian [became] an active educator” (p. 245). A study by Smith in 1955 showed that adult education had diverse meanings to librarians, and many could speak only of what the library “did” rather than how it “educated.” Other findings showed that rather than see themselves as educational agents, libraries were content to simply provide a link to adult education agencies. It is not surprising, then, that a survey by Penland in 1961 uncovered a discrepancy between the educational expectations of librarians and management in terms of their “involvement in adult education” (p. 239).

Profound technological changes for libraries have provided an excellent opportunity for adults to develop the multiliteracies required to feel empowered in the new knowledge economy in recent years (Adams, Krolak, Kupidura & Pahernick, 2002). Others, however, caution that rapid changes in information and communications technology place librarians in perpetual learning mode and make their education practice fragmented (Crowie, 2010). While some studies suggest librarians highly value helping people to develop as citizens, Imel and Duckett (2009) argued that these once progressive institutions with such strong links to community groups are now so over-professionalized and so focused on job skills training and fact finding that they are neglecting the strong social purpose they once had. In fact, Neill (1980) argued that libraries needed to become more “impartial in the service of social change...[to] be conservative and wait for change, not act as a catalyst” (p. 18).

English and Mayo (2012) argued that, today, “adult education is under assault from a variety of capitalist and neo-conservative forces” (p. 1), a comment that reflects a current challenge in Canadian and British libraries. Despite media attention and public pressure, “the UK ... quietly lost more than 200 branches [in 2011], according to a detailed national survey” (Flood, 2012), and this number continues to increase. Many of the UK interviewees noted that paralleling library closures, not surprisingly, was a substantial reduction in librarians working in those remaining libraries. Although in Canada, public libraries have fared much better, this has not been without struggle and there has been, in some locations, a reduction in library staff. In England, the decimation of the library can be attributed directly to austerity measures taken by the existing conservative government. In Canada,

there has also been a reduction in librarians due to funding cutbacks and lack of government support, and in some instances due to technological tools such as automated checkout and sophisticated search engines. However, Canadian librarians have turned to supporting users in other ways, providing language and employment services to immigrant families, supporting adult and youth literacy, and using makerspaces for support of multiliteracy development for the 21st century.

No longer do libraries fulfill the sole role as repositories of books and lending (Kent, 1978; Lerner, 2009; UNESCO, 1997). As society has changed and become more complex, so too have the roles and purposes of the public library. As neo-liberalism has taken root, that too has brought about change. This means that much of the role of today's library is to locate and share information; however, it is, and has historically been, positioned as a space for enhancing democratic society by providing equitable access to resources and programs for all citizens. As libraries become more technologically connected and driven, it is also important for librarians as adult educators to continue enabling people to challenge their thinking, access multiple perspectives, and connect with people in their community. As Durrani (2014) commented,

In post-historical perspectives libraries will increasingly come to be viewed as mere instrumentalities, facilitators of an "information economy". If, against this current, libraries are to continue to represent the dimension of human reason, emancipation, possibility that they have represented historically, if the human significance of the library is not to be entirely effaced, renewed effort to create a space for radical reflection on our purposes, our vocation and our responsibility is required. This is the fundamental task of progressive librarianship. (p. ix)

Levi (cited in Durrani, 2014) added that information in a society is a powerful tool and that the "role, purpose, use, controls, and relevance of information" need thoughtful mediation so as not to be "misused to manipulate people and misinform them or provide partial insights into a subject without providing a comprehensive context and history" (p. 24). Users need to learn the skills and attitudes to formulate informed and reasoned judgment. On this note, we turn to our own study of librarians in Canada and Britain, two parliamentary democracies that are caught up in the global frameworks of neo-liberal ideology.

### **Research Design**

This article reports on our cross-national research of librarians' adult education work conducted over a three-year period from 2011 to 2014. Past studies and changing times raise important questions about adult education in public libraries today. Our cross-national study aimed to provide understandings about the visions and work of librarians. Harris (2007) argued that we can learn much from exploring how people face situations and challenges, their differences and commonalities, and what these tell us about our interconnected world. The primary question that guided our study was as follows: How do librarians make sense of adult education and its purpose today? Sub-questions explored their backgrounds and training, their role as librarians and library educators, their articulations of education and learning, and their purposes in the institution and society. We then asked our participants to describe the adult education programs and activities they

offered and whether they considered themselves to be adult educators. We explored their educational philosophies and their expected outcomes for their adult-focused programs in relation to their responses about adult education. Additionally, we explored with them the challenges of government policies, social and demographic change, and technology.

Twenty-six librarians took part voluntarily in the study. Of this group, 6 were male and 20 were female. These librarians worked in 18 medium and large-scale libraries, including central and reference libraries, in Canada (Victoria, Vancouver, Surrey, Richmond, Ottawa, and Toronto) and in Great Britain (London, Birmingham, and Glasgow). We chose large-scale institutions in urban areas because they carry out a multitude of pedagogical activities for a highly diverse population, which makes their work very complex.

We used three data collection strategies. The first included individual interviews, which provided a space for the librarians to speak candidly about their work. The second was small focus group sessions, two in Britain and one in Canada. The aims of the focus groups were to develop a social interaction between participants, to speak and respond to each other, to compare experiences, and to react to others' situations and understandings (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000; Hess-Biber & Leavy, 2007). The interviews were fully transcribed. To analyze the data, we individually coded the data, identifying common patterns, ideas, and phrases that aligned directly with the research questions. We then came together to discuss our findings and identify the voices that would capture best the patterns and complexities (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007). All participant names are pseudonyms; we do not identify institutions, but we do identify the country of origin.

Our third data collection site was websites. We visited the websites of the chosen institutions and included another eight to ensure a broader picture. We focused on the websites because Irving and English (2011) reminded us that they are "important tools for...institutions working for the public good because they represent their formal online presence" (p. 5). Websites are often the first entry point for people looking for a library, and they convey certain kinds of understanding about the pedagogical work of those who work within them. We asked, "What do these sites tell us about the importance or value of adult education learning within the institutions? How might adult education be reflected, or challenged, in the understandings of the librarians?" Websites were analyzed for the terms adult education and adult learning and the types of programs specifically identified for adults.

## Findings

In this section, we outline our findings as they related to the research questions. We begin with librarians' backgrounds, training, and sense of identity. This is important as it sets the stage for many of the other findings. Following this, we look specifically at technology and then to the very distinct ways the librarians viewed education and learning and their role in the institution and society. We conclude this paper with a discussion of the findings and their implications for libraries and adult education, and a suggestion for further research.

### *Background, Identity, and Training*

We found that how librarians identified themselves in relation to adult education corresponded closely to their academic backgrounds and/or training as well as their institutional position. We recognized that the participants had many varied responses

related to how they perceived their role as adult educators and to the term itself. Many did not recognize themselves as adult educators and preferred not to be identified as such. This was often due to perceptions of education—i.e., in formal institutions—and they became library educators as an alternative to formal education. Consistently, the younger librarians—those under 40 years of age—held university degrees in library science. Elizabeth in Canada argued that “it’s really mandatory now to get a job.” However, across both countries, none of the formal training had included any courses focusing on adult education, although Angela noted how “some [courses] did talk about customer service and working with the public, but nothing about adult education.” We will address the issue of “customer” later in this section, but perhaps as a consequence of the lack of focus on adult education, none of the younger librarians identified as an adult educator. There were also other reasons for hesitancy. Lucy (Canada), for example, argued that her institution basically equated the term education with children’s learning: “We mean by the education program that it is aimed at children.” Our analysis of the websites showed an eclectic mix of adult education activities, ranging from author talks and public lectures on social issues to business, legal, and personal finance workshops; from career and job search activities to English as a second or additional language. Yet none of the websites contained a section called “adult education,” and only two (one in each country) had a section called “learning.” Few references were made explicitly to adults, although it was easy to find “families” and “children.” By way of explanation, Kindra in Britain stated,

It’s probably just differences in terminology because we tend to talk about community learning in this city rather than adult education. Adult education is a terminology that went out of use here some time ago. We talked about adult learning, but that has now shifted to community-based learning.

Kindra is arguing that adult education is an outdated term that has been replaced by more contemporary discourses of learning, and that adults have been replaced with community. While there is nothing inherently wrong with this, and in fact many adult educators have shifted to the terms learning and community (e.g., English & Mayo, 2012), this shift can be and in fact is problematic in the library, and we take this up shortly. But returning to identity, librarians also shied away from identifying themselves as adult educators by arguing for the value of working with outside agencies. Libraries across both countries have developed hundreds of partnerships with universities, local arts organizations, non-governmental agencies, and a host of other institutions and groups that offer the space to provide educational and other types of services. Suromitra (Canada) in particular argued for the value of outside pedagogical expertise, adult education agencies with the capacity to undertake, for example, adult literacy courses with immigrants, rather than trying to do it themselves. Partnerships were frequently framed in terms of economic benefits: “It’s about bringing things together, taking the savings and re-investing those savings. It’s not easy but I’m very glad to say that no one is questioning the value of a free public library service in this city, and indeed we are growing and growing, and the need is getting greater” (Barbara, Britain).

The seasoned librarians in both countries tended to differ in terms of their sense of identity. Few had difficulty identifying as an adult educator, and in fact most embraced it: “Definitely, yes, I see myself as an adult educator” (Lise, Britain). Many did not have any

formal university degree, although some held degrees in anthropology, history, or literature. According to Chowdhury, Burton, McMenemy, and Poulter (2008), a library science degree is a relatively new requirement for librarians, and most of these librarians had entered the profession before the completion of a library science program was required for employment. They had acquired what Suzanne called their “people and adult education skills” through hands-on experience, often coupled with professional development activities. Perhaps not surprisingly, these librarians tended to believe the primary role of the library was as an adult education/learning site, although they too recognized a schism between this term and institutional understandings: “I would say we do a huge amount of adult education, but I think we do it from a very different perspective. Our definitions probably are quite different...but I would say that is a lot of the services we offer” (Len, Canada).

Problematically, seasoned librarians worried about the younger librarians’ “limited” human relations capacities, arguing in England in particular that it was difficult to hire new staff to replace those who were retiring. They also worried about the deficit in the pedagogical understandings that they believed were fundamental:

The end-of-the-line philosophies are trying to capture the excitement that resides in discovery, and knowing how to treat learning as a voyage of discovery. I think some of the systems imposed in library college training can actually strangle that excitement early on. You can get obsessed with organizing things and putting things in the right places rather than what you actually do with the things you have organized. (Blake, England)

This speaks to Irving’s (2010) and Imel and Duckett’s (2009) concerns about the current over-professionalism of the librarian, and its implications.

However, the participants still cited instances when they themselves were attempting to address the human, pedagogical deficit through in situ training:

It is very interesting that you are asking about this [adult education] because we are doing a workshop at the end of the month on teaching skills, how to teach adults. It is a day-long workshop for most of the librarians and some of the information technicians as well who are interested in having some skills in the adult education area. We need to teach the librarians how to teach because you do not learn how to teach in library schools. (Belinda, Britain)

### ***The Impact of Technology***

Although public libraries have been traditionally situated as collectors, preservers, and lenders of books, it was often difficult to get the librarians to actually talk about them. Time and time again we had to ask what role the books are now playing in the library as most of the interview was taken up with discussions about technology. Our findings show a significant pedagogical push toward skills development vis-à-vis information and communications technology. Interviewees showed us with pride the banks of computers, almost all of which were in constant use during our visits. They spoke of how the computers and the Internet had opened the world to people, to information and knowledge, and, importantly, had brought many more users to the library. Even the websites were touted as highly beneficial to the future of the library:

The website for us is like another branch, a service provider, as opposed to simply a marketing or communication tool. It is very much a resource or another way for the people in [this city] to use the library. The numbers testify to that, as there are a lot of library users who probably never come to the branch but they can browse and use the materials. (Karen)

One can argue from the data that a great deal of in-house education the librarians now do is centred on technology. They teach not only the basics of computers to seniors or new immigrants but also many advanced courses because, "in terms of communities, we have a more sophisticated, let us say, clientele—downtown or midtown communities—and we still have people who want some introductory classes such as seniors. By more sophisticated I mean help with their iPads" (Georgia, Canada). They have also become the go-to experts in terms of understanding the latest technology. This has been a problem on one hand, as they scramble to keep up with new technology, but on the other, it has driven some librarians toward adult education with positive pedagogical results. For example, Teresa in England was mandated to teach computer courses and soon decided she needed further training. This is how she described the result:

It did change my practice in a big way. We were shown the importance of doing group work, of bringing people together to learn from each other. This made me realize why I used to get quite frustrated because the onus of teaching was on me. For example, I would be showing them [community members] how to do things and check it myself, and they would not even look at me and then they would go to the printer and print their stuff and that was it. However, now I get them to check each other's work and the focus is on them rather than on me, and that is really how it should be. I realized I was wrong in the past and as a consequence I have become the least important person in the room, which is how it should be.

But technology has also had some negative impacts, creating schisms and struggles. Yuquin (Canada) noted how

we are struggling with technology right now because...[the lack of] resources for staff to learn and be comfortable is difficult. We do not own the devices people want help with. In addition, a lot of our staff is older. Whereas the younger ones do not have a problem since they were more or less reared on technology, the older librarians find it challenging—not all, but many.

Younger librarians tended to characterize seasoned librarians' lack of professional certification as tantamount to their fear of technology and change. Although this definitely speaks to the generational gap we noted above, Beth (Britain) acknowledged that technology was a challenge "even for those who know how to use a device [because] they have taken that device home and played [with] and used it, [but then] the user comes along and asks you something else and you did not practise that so you got it wrong." Beth is echoing Crowie's (2010) concern about the pressures of the perpetual learning mode that librarians face and the implications of not being able to keep up, despite doing everything in one's power. Linda (Canada) took this a step further when she commented on what she sees as

the negative impact on staff engagement. She lamented the fact that the librarians used to connect about a lot of different areas and ideas, but now “mostly we have tech days...where the staff discuss technology.” Use of diverse technology tools to support library users was generally seen as positive, but from an adult education perspective, technology reduced the opportunities for collaboration and community learning; rather, the opportunities afforded by technologies were for individual learning. Technology was often used for efficiency (librarian as technician and mediator) rather than in pedagogical ways (librarian as community facilitator).

### *Learning and Self-Direction*

As alluded to above, there has been a discursive shift in adult education over the past two decades away from education and toward learning and an emphasis on self-directed learning (English & Mayo, 2012; Martin, 2003). This shift is very apparent in the library world as well. When we asked participants on both sides of the Atlantic to explain their philosophies or understandings of education or learning, the majority talked about learning. Learning was very much seen as “something that happens inside you,” and it was placed in contrast to education, which was often defined as “something that happens to you” (Agnes, England). Learning was positioned as a means “to give people the opportunity to learn for themselves” (Helga, Canada). It was articulated as empowering, providing adults with skills and the capacity for self-direction and development. Others spoke eloquently about how they understood knowledge creation and its role in a person’s life:

People say libraries are about knowledge. Libraries are not about knowledge. Libraries are places where people come [to] access the stories of other people’s lives. They access information and what they do is to internalize that—that is where knowledge happens. Knowledge is what I make of the world around me. It is the wisdom I gather from how I interpret and how I listen to other people’s stories. Libraries always have been one of those unique places where knowledge and learning are self-driven. (Arne, Canada, emphasis his)

The discourse of learning was often linked, for many librarians, with the notion of accessibility, of the library as a place for everyone, particularly for those most marginalized in society. Mitch (Canada), for example, argued that libraries “are for the people who need help the most...they are the foundational rock of the library.” Libraries are thus providing learning opportunities to the most disadvantaged, and in this way librarians are supporting what Civallero (2007) called “the realization of democratic ideals” (p. 36).

As enablers of self-directed learning, librarians were comfortable with seeing their role as facilitators, responding to, rather than in any way directing, “how individual customers define their need to learn” (Len, Canada). Critics of learning and self-directed learning, however, remind us to be wary, and there were some reasons for concern in the data. In Len’s comment—and there were many other such examples in both countries—library users were referred to as “customers” and the library likened to a “business,” and that business was often about employment-orientated skills development and capacities. Language and individual learning, too, are problematic. Cairns (2003) reminded us that it is a problem to link a language and practice of market approaches to a discourse of individual learning/empowerment, because the individual is reduced to an “economic actor” rather than a

political, social subject. Our website analysis showed that computer and employment-oriented activities far outweighed other types of educational programs, particularly in Britain. Laurie (Britain) stated her learning beliefs like this: "My role is to prepare people to get jobs. We help them to fill out forms and write resumés. We show them how to do job searches and then we leave them to get on with it. We need to make sure they come out of here with the best chance of getting a job." However, in the face of ongoing social injustice, libraries must also contribute "actively to the formation of an informed electorate" rather than just preparing citizens for the global marketplace (Civallero, 2007, p. 36).

### *Educating for Change*

Of course libraries are not only preparing people for the marketplace. Civallero (2007) claimed, "The first challenge for establishing a fair and just library system is to address the question of the democracy deficit in the world today" (p. 29). She continued,

The only way for libraries to connect with their world is to understand and respond appropriately to their struggles for equality and social justice. This is not a matter for which librarians can opt out on a pretense of "neutrality" of the profession. If the term "we are all in it together" has a meaning at all, it is in this context, since librarians are not sitting on a floating cloud removed from all the social, political and economic reality. This reality not only influences the library, but the library and librarians also impact on the society in dialectical relations from which it is not possible to opt out. (p. 35)

Across Canada, particularly, but also in some institutions in Britain, the seasoned librarians in particular spoke about the power of using education and of their strong commitment to the social and creative purpose of the library. Against the cascade of technology, librarians talked about taking back what June (Britain) called "the unflinching cultural spirit of the library," sharing their ideas and activities regarding arts-based adult education and articulating a strong cultural identity. As noted above, they stressed the value of the diversity of the cultural partnerships they had built with popular theatre organizations and literary groups. They have provided a space for visual arts and puppetry exhibitions, along with other art forms:

Some groups like theatre groups do not have a physical location where they can bring people. I also hear from people the message that the library has a positive brand, and these organizations want to be connected to us. Another example of that is the Toronto Comic Arts Festival, which was a festival to do with comics and graphic novels. They were located in different places that did not suit them...so they really pursued us wanting to be here. It was a good match for us because it attracts a brand new audience...Therefore, it is good for both organizations (Lydia, Canada).

Partnerships like this also had an effect on staffing and adult education within the institution: "[Because of these partnerships] we recently hired a staff member to the adult programming and we are seeing an explosion in that" (Bell, Canada). In Britain, librarians actively participated in community festivals and fairs to give visibility to the library as a cultural space. There were also examples, however, of arts-based education projects:

I did a big photography project with ESOL [English speakers of other languages] adults where we looked at Victorian photography. Then I gave the group digital cameras to see what they would take photos of around Kings Cross [in London]. Their pictures and documentation were so insightful of tradition and contemporary society. (Belinda, Britain)

Time and again, participants challenged traditional views of libraries as edifices of silence by talking about activities such as their dance lessons in disco or hip hop. As Edna (Canada) reminded us, “People can just come and be with other people. It is not all silence now, you know. We have spaces where people can sit quietly and read, but as you can see [from the examples], we have places where they can meet and talk to each other over a coffee.”

One very important activity that is taking place across Canada is the Human Library Project, an adult education process developed in Denmark that aims to address issues of intolerance and ignorance (e.g., Clover & Dogus, 2014). When we asked why this particular activity, Deborah (Canada) said,

The human library really is about bringing community together, about bringing diverse groups of people with different backgrounds or points of view together. Because in some of our locations we have such a mixed demographic, it seems natural to have the people that are here on a daily basis, conversing... It's geared toward people who realize that they maybe have stereotypes or a hang-up or something, and want to explore it, and either do something about it, or just have a discussion or hear another point of view.

The seasoned librarians also talked about the social role of the library in terms of technology, but positioned it around the need for critical literacy:

It's a challenge actually to show people how to use that world [of technology] they've discovered, but also to point them in the direction of looking at it with a more critical eye. There's a huge big world of information out there, but it's not all information necessarily that is of equal merit or value. Part of the role I think we have to play in the library is to say to people that you need to be a bit more critical about what you're doing. You need to be more critical when you read newspapers. Look at this website, you want to compare it with some other source of information and make sure that what you are getting is accurate and it's not an agenda or something else behind it. I think information literacy is absolutely crucial to what we're doing. (Helga, Britain)

### Discussion and Conclusions

Durrani (2014) argued, “Librarians everywhere have a role to play in eliminating the root causes of poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, and inequality” (p. ix). However, she noted that there is a gap in library offerings between meeting individuals' immediate needs in a neo-liberal agenda and “new and alternative ideas and visions” (p. 1). This dialectic is very much reflected in our findings, and we conclude by discussing the implications of our complex findings for libraries, adult education, and society.

In 1988, Marsick wrote that in an age of unprecedented challenges, adults “are pressed to learn continuously and transformatively in a world that demands higher order thinking” (p. 119). Findings in our study show that libraries and librarians are at the forefront of enabling this learning, helping adults from all walks of life to navigate the many streams of change in their personal and professional lives. A passion for developing self-directedness in adults, helping them to find the information and develop the skills they require, remains at the heart of what librarians see as important educational work; this is something that Brooks and Reich (1974) suggested was perhaps the most important role of libraries. The emphasis on learning in general, and self-directed learning in particular, is important because it aims for control and agency; it is a direct response to the needs of adults, and particularly to the needs of the most marginalized—new immigrants and the unemployed. This is what educators such as Marsick (1988) referred to as learning to learn, and it is more than an essential skill for the world today. Understandings of learning coincide with a valuing of providing skills—technological and otherwise—that adults need to find employment and function in today’s economy. Longworth (2000) reminded us that organizations “large and small...and in every sector of activity” need to recognize and promote learning “as key to an employed future” (p. 122). In both countries, libraries are doing this in situ and through partnerships with different agencies and institutions. Going further, the digital emphasis has dramatically changed what librarians need to know (Crowie, 2010), and this has pushed librarians to take adult education courses that enable them to think about and change their own educational practices toward being more participatory, engaging, and peer-based.

However, there are indications that education is being left to learning and that there is an unquestioned belief in the “good” of employment and technology skills. Civallero (2007) reminded us that neutrality is not an option and that librarians must continue to respond to struggles for equality and social justice. But this seems to conflict with the philosophy of self-directed learning which, for example, heralds choice as simply and always good. This fails to question whether a person’s choice of learning is actually a choice at all or if it is simply a response to the pressures of neo-liberalism and the market system. Going further, a reality of today’s wired world is that people need to acquire critical literacy and media skills to navigate a complex virtual world of conflicting, unequal, and even often invalid information (Adams, 2008). It is problematic when younger librarians dismiss challenges and critical approaches to technology by seasoned librarians as simply a fear of technology or change. Will the library of the future miss the opportunity to be a space of critical dialogue and learning and simply reduce itself to utilitarianism (Irving, 2010)? Is this what will save the library? It is in fact ironic that despite the capitulation in Britain to neo-liberal individualized, market-oriented skills and technology utilitarianism pedagogies, hundreds of libraries have closed and more are headed for the same fate.

Building on the above, the data seem to suggest a schism between adult education and the purposes of the library between younger and more seasoned librarians. While this is certainly not true across the board, it raises further questions for the future. The critical thinking, adult education, and social analysis skills that the seasoned librarians picked up experientially and through professional development by unions seem to be all but missing in the repertoire of formal education programs for librarians. None of the participants could recall anything in this area. As Belinda reminded us, “Library work is taught as a science, not an art.” As a science, does it send a message of presumed neutrality, to return to Civallero’s (2007) point that is refracted through the pedagogical work? Durrani (2014)

argued that “conservative librarianship” cannot challenge austerity agendas. An important future study would be the curricula of formal programs and even of professional training today to see how they are actually framing adult education in terms of the need for libraries to play a more fully democratic role and to take up social issues.

Despite the problems, there is cause for hope that these institutions are playing an important aesthetic and critical pedagogical role in society. They may not be engaging in adult education themselves, but they are responding to Martin’s (2003) calls for an emphasis not solely on learning, but on education, an intentional and purposeful pedagogy aimed at social justice. Moreover, many are espousing a cultural identity and enacting this in powerful ways, not least through creative partnerships with theatre groups. Librarians are engaging in the democratization of culture, bringing the arts to people in ways that are accessible and bring joy and learning to their lives. Hyland-Russell and Groen (2012) reminded us never to underestimate the importance of bringing the arts, often seen as reserved for the elite, into everyone’s life. But libraries are equally practising cultural democracy, developing programs and activities through, for example, photography, to engage adults in the collective production of art around issues important to their lives. Adult education and arts-based scholars remind us “to keep in mind the significance of the aesthetic dimension within a politically oriented emancipatory pedagogy,” as it illustrates an important support for a more just society (Collins, 2006, p. 125).

Durrani (2014) called for a progressive librarianship to undertake the social responsibility of libraries, and she argued that librarians cannot and should not “refuse to acknowledge this social responsibility” (p. ix). Libraries and librarians must take a stand and be intentional in their purpose to liberate minds and to provide space and opportunity where equity and equal access to more critical forms and spaces of adult education and learning are keys to their role. Although not without problems, libraries today, particularly in Canada, are acting as what Kranich (2010) called agents of civic learning, providing public pedagogical spaces where adults can collectively debate, discuss, and exchange ideas and address issues of common concern. But they are also places of art, colour, dance, and joy, developed with a committed group of people determined to make a positive contribution to the lives of the people of their communities. By providing access and a multitude of opportunities for all citizens, “the library lends its support to the realization of democratic ideals” (Civallero, 2007, p. 36). Although the future of public libraries in England, and the role they are often relegated to play in Canada, is being challenged, they are enacting a sense of social responsibility that makes them invaluable, albeit complex, sites of adult education and learning that deserve more attention.

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