

Review of *Developing Social Equity in Australian Adult Education: Lessons from the Past*

Ralf St. Clair, University of Victoria

It is always a pleasure to spend some time with a text devoted to a deep dive into our field, and this book does not disappoint. Pamela Osmond's experience as a long-time literacy organizer and tutor lends the book an air of authenticity. The author focused on the rise and fall of social justice values in adult literacy programs in New South Wales for her doctoral research, and this book is one of the results. It offers a rich and entirely partial account of a fascinating period in adult literacy education and will resonate with the experiences of many of us who have been involved in the field for a while.

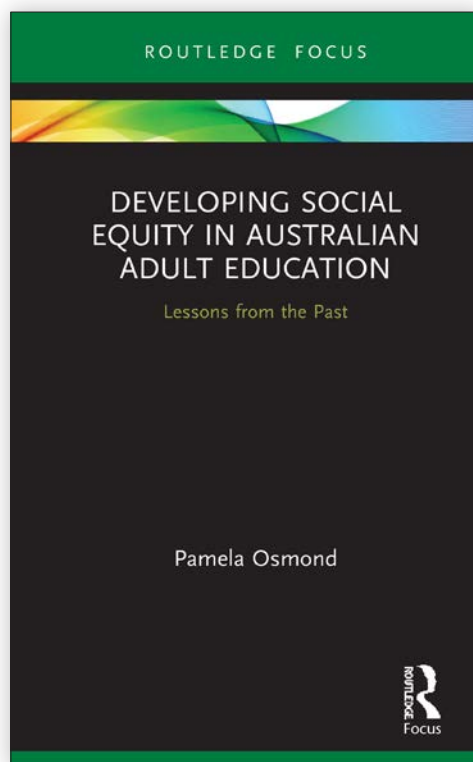
Osmond's aim with this text is to offer an account of the "drivers or actors that were responsible for the emergence of the initial adult literacy programs, and those that were responsible for their transformation" (p. 3). When literacy programs began to gain some structure, about 50 years ago, they were

volunteer-driven and inspired by commitments to social justice and helping the silenced to gain a voice. By the late 1980s, adult literacy and numeracy provision was being incorporated into

vocational education, albeit with some preservation of the original commitments, and by the 2000s, it had become an accountability driven aspect of work readiness training. Literacy educators gained some level of professionalization as vocational instructors but lost the centrality of social justice values. The question driving Osmond's work is "how did that happen?"

The book is relatively short and takes a chronological approach with three sections: one on pre-consolidation literacy, one

on the foundation years and one on the emergent neoliberal discourse. This structure works well and is easy to navigate. Osmond's text is interspersed with quotations from interviews, adding a variety



Osmond, P. (2021). *Developing Social Equity in Australian Adult Education: Lessons from the Past*. Routledge. 132 pages. \$69.95, hardcover. ISBN: 978-0-367-68984-1 (hardcover)

of voices and positionalities to the book. Overall, this is a strong account of the coalescence of ad-hoc literacy instruction into a field and a system, and their subsequent colonization by a set of actors with different value commitments.

The author could have chosen to engage with the changes in the field from a more theoretical perspective. Two broad areas of theory are mentioned, particularly early in the book, but are not returned to later in the discussion. The first is actor-network theory (Latour, 1996), an emerging form of social enquiry treating non-human actors as if they have agency in social networks. The potential of this approach in a historical review is the ability to bring documents and policies alongside humans in detailed analyses of decisions and actions. This book does not fully exploit the potential of actor-network theory, though the need for books to be less methodology heavy than dissertations and theses is important to acknowledge.

The second theoretical area is more central to the argument as it relates directly to the “why” of these changes. Osmond tends to refer to “neoliberalism” as the impetus behind the change from social justice to employability as the rationale for literacy instruction, as well as the move towards testing and accountability. This could have benefitted from being laid out more clearly; there are many forms of neoliberalism, and the need for the specific Australian form to colonize and undermine existing values and practices is not made clear. I do see this as a bit of a lost opportunity despite the difficulty of bringing together a strong account of lived experience and high-level analysis.

In many ways, the story recounted in this book is reminiscent of developments in other parts of the world: a rise of social activist literacy in the 1970s followed by incorporation and vocationalization by the turn of the century. I am not aware of too many other broad accounts of this history, though an excellent Canadian overview by Elfert and Walker (2020) exists. The Canadian article created some pushback from stakeholders (Hayes, 2020) so it will be interesting to see if the same thing happens in the Australian case. I can't help thinking of the aphorism “who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past” (Orwell, 1950, p. 44). More histories of our field with attention to the lived experiences of those involved would be very welcome.

I believe this book will be of interest to people who have been around the literacy field for long enough to recognize the story it tells, but also to people who are interested in how the work developed from church basements to private training providers. There are some strong cautionary elements here, such as the need to be careful about the unintended consequences of stabilization and professionalization, as well as the double-edged sword of accountability. On the one hand it allows programs to demonstrate their value, but on the other it can interrupt and influence the work we are trying to do. Showing what we do makes a difference, and why that difference is a good thing, remains a central problem in all forms of community-based education. The book ends with some reasons to be optimistic about the future and standing out among them is the importance of humanist commitments, working with and for people. It is a privilege to enter into that work, even by proxy, and share the stories of a unique and important period in the early years of our field.

References

Elfert, M. & Walker, J. (2020). The rise and fall of adult literacy. Policy Lessons from Canada. *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults*, 11(1), 109-125. <https://doi.org/10.25656/01:18847>

Hayes, B. (2020). An “alternative analysis” to Elfert and Walker. As I was saying... <https://brigidhayes.wordpress.com/2020/02/24/an-alternative-analysis-to-elfert-and-walker/>

Latour, B. (1996). On actor-network theory. A few clarifications plus more than a few complications. *Soziale Welt*, 47, 369-381. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40878163>

Orwell, G. (1950). 1984. Signet Classic.