

## *Introduction: Changing Perspectives*

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IN THE 1959 ISSUE of *Library Trends*, "Current Trends in Adult Education," the editor, Walter Stone, stated that "optimism, enthusiasm, and personal dedication are among the most distinguishing characteristics of all those, including librarians, who work and write in behalf of adult education."<sup>1</sup> Almost a quarter of a century later, adult educators still show those characteristics, but with a major difference: the characteristics are based on knowledge and skills that have significantly increased since 1959, and which are supported by an important shift in perspective.

The 1959 issue and this issue of *Library Trends* show interesting relationships. Both share the key assumption that librarians are adult educators, and both outline examples of innovative and responsive work with adults. This present issue argues by implication that an acceptance of educative roles for librarians is developed only with a clear understanding of how and why adults learn. The current issue reflects the increase in knowledge and skills over the past twenty-three years, and illustrates a new perspective for work with adult learners.

The new body of knowledge and skills, as summarized for example by Kidd and Cross,<sup>2</sup> is supporting the growing recognition that we and all other adults learn throughout our lives in various styles which do not depend on classroom-bound teaching. The fact that learning does not stop at graduation has enormous implications for anyone working with and for adults. Some of those implications are addressed in this issue:

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others can be dealt with later as readers examine their individual library contexts.

The developing recognition by educators of the qualities of adult behavior and experience has led to the growth of a specific body of knowledge and skills that supports a facilitative or helping approach toward adult learners; as distinct from an authority-based, prescriptive and pedagogic approach.<sup>3</sup>

The focus of "Adult Learners, Learning and Public Libraries" is on the specific helping or facilitative approach as it relates to adult learners, and the implications such an approach has for library services and administration. This approach reflects, in short, a concern for the learner—a learner-centered view—which is challenging adult educators to examine their traditional values and practice. The issue has been structured to encourage a change in the reader's perspective, and to depart from some traditional conceptual frameworks used for assessing adult education services in libraries.

It is not meant to duplicate the existing monograph material on library services to adult learners.<sup>4</sup> Rather, it goes to the adult education world in order to present the perspective, knowledge and concerns which condition adult educators' work with adult learners. The term *learner* will be used throughout the issue to refer to any adult who uses a library. The experience of librarians and the research into informal and independent learning justifies regarding reading and information seeking as learning behavior.<sup>5</sup>

### **A Collaborative Collection**

Adult educators in the introductory articles focus on significant knowledge and issues concerning adult learners and their learning behavior. Such an approach illustrates three concepts. Often the presentation of new or significantly revised perspectives needs the stimulus and accuracy of new speakers. The collaboration by adult educators and librarians in this issue parallels the collaborative learning relationships between learner and facilitator. It also models collaborative administrative relationships between adult education and library organizations.

As Roby Kidd's personal and professional stature was international, so is his review of global trends. As an internationalist he affirmed the belief that access to opportunities and skills for learning are a fundamental human right, not a privilege. As a practitioner, he regretted what he saw as a decline in working relationships between librarians and other adult educationalists. As a scholar, he acknowledged the extent of radical changes in our understanding about the

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processes of learning and adult learner behavior. As a realist, he posed critical questions and choices for librarians if they accept the validity of the question, "Is a right to learning a basic issue?" Librarians who knew Roby Kidd will recognize in his article the conviction, skill, style, and sensitivity that characterized his active and lifelong commitment to adult learners. His comments about involvement and commitment are appropriate for professional as well as personal development: "People tend to commit themselves deeply under circumstances in which they dare to make a dramatic break with their past or a marked shift in attitude. If we are serious about social and educational change, we must multiply the number of experiences in which commitment may occur."<sup>6</sup>

Joan Neehall and Allen Tough discuss the results of their recent research stemming from Tough's earlier work already familiar to some librarians. Their focus on intentional and unintentional change as a reason and outcome of learning leads into the learner-centered context of this issue. Their discussion of the elements of choice, activity and the degree of self-directedness shown in learner behavior has sobering implications, as has the finding that the adult learners were, at the beginning of their interviews, remarkably self-deprecating about their own efforts to bring about change.

Neehall and Tough have identified some very personal and individual characteristics of noninstitutional adult learner behavior. Alan Knox in contrast has identified issues around entry into participation in more formal learning programs. He argues that the design of appropriate information and counseling services depends on an accurate knowledge of factors which influence levels and extent of participation and effective marketing strategies. He refers to well-known adult education research and, by his synthesis and perspective, provokes further questions regarding practice.

Dorothy MacKeracher takes a strongly theoretical approach to our understanding about what happens to adults during the process of learning. Her arguments support two basic assumptions—learning is a continuous activity, and its context cannot be limited to formal classrooms, group discussions or individual reading. Using a clearly defined learner-centered view, she explains why learning is an individual and active process, identifies conditions which affect that process and its facilitation, and outlines alternative strategies for librarians who want to strengthen their skills in helping people learn. Readers will recognize familiar and recurring problems associated with reference interviews, learner's advisory work, and other adult services.

David Carr concentrates on the subtleties of the helping process within a library context. His exposition of the theme that helping is "instrumental participation" in people's lives shows up the limitations of the "serving patrons" concept. The dynamic quality of this participation is dependent not only on communication, knowledge and skills of the librarian and of the client, but also on the further dimensions common to all developing interpersonal relationships. The associated theme of interdependence draws out significant implications for practice.

The evaluation of North York (Ontario) Public Library's services to adults shows successful practice supported by sound theory. Phyllis Goldman and Joan Fulford identify success factors that bear strong resemblance to those listed in 1956 by Phinney.<sup>7</sup> Their programming content and method show a close and collaborative relationship between learner and librarian, and an accurate identification within reasonable limits of that "teachable moment"—the point at which the learner is ready to learn. The trends they identify are not new in themselves—what is important and worth watching is the interrelationships of those trends, and how those dynamics affect the ongoing revision of specific work objectives.

The Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore has shown a long commitment to work with adult learners, and a high level of responsiveness to individual and group needs. The strength of this tradition enables an honest pragmatic view of the future, and realistic assessments of internal and external constraints. It is significant that staff attitudes are noted here as a critical problem. This identification reflects the concerns of other adult education agencies for the development of human resources, as distinct from the development of material resources.

The two case studies refer to various short- and long-term effects on services, library administration decisions and the levels of funding resources. Lois Fleming argues that past experiences should have taught library staff some tough lessons without denying them alternative strategies for constructive and planned action. She stresses the need for adopting a conceptual framework for solving problems in management. This parallels the emphasis on and use by the adult educators of their conceptual frameworks for dealing with issues in adult learning. Frameworks provide contexts and reasons for setting specific objectives before establishing policies and procedures. Her concern about reasons for and methods of evaluation extends traditional thinking on this issue.

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Robert Clark links his discussion of management implications to the areas of funding and community support in a United States political context. He states that the broad community input inherent in the procedures for setting agency rules and regulations can stimulate new or revised directions for libraries. He sees the work of American state libraries as essential in gaining funds, licensing staff, providing consulting services, and helping in community assessments. Such services illustrate state libraries adopting deliberately proactive stances in a very competitive arena. Clark's emphasis on knowledge of the power structure reinforces his themes of assertiveness and political skills.

While each discussion introduces various implications for learner-centered practice, each in turn leads to questions about education and training to support that practice. John Allred and Judith Bowen discuss the British experience and perspectives around professional education, and emphasize the development of education programs which evidence a sophisticated treatment of political and economic factors affecting the design and delivery of programs and services. A continuing problem for the future will be the assessment of congruence between the demands of practitioners and the philosophies and attitudes of library science educators.

The choice of articles for this issue represents a highly selective approach to this 1983 update on adult learners and their relationships with public libraries. The article sequence supports a conceptual framework that starts in an adult education context, moves to the individual learner, and then examines institutional responses. The selection has been based on the need to avoid repetitive discussion of library-based work with adult learners. No attempt has been made to include excellent historical reviews and earlier summaries of practice,<sup>8</sup> or more contemporary generalist writing.<sup>9</sup> A futurist approach has been avoided, because librarians and other adult educators are concerned chiefly with perspectives and responses appropriate for present demands. For maximum value, this issue on "Adult Learners, Learning and Public Libraries" needs to be related to recent specialist work in the development of learning how to learn skills, in educational brokerage services, and in the development of conceptual frameworks that relate the processes of learning to library-based activity.<sup>10</sup>

### **A New Perspective**

One significant theme in all the articles is a concern for learners—for how and why they learn, and for how sensitive and relevant are the

institutional responses to learner needs and behaviors. This theme reflects the learner-centered view of education discussed earlier; one which recognizes differences in value and practices from an institution-centered view. Such a latter view is evidenced in staff preoccupation with rules and regulations, to prescriptive rather than exploratory, risk-taking approaches to change, and to a reliance on and reference to the past.

It is a key contention of this issue that library services to adult learners are doomed to relative obscurity and irrelevance unless library staff strengthen a learner-centered view, and lessen their preoccupations with institution-centered concerns. Such a view will help confirm the inescapable fact that it is not so much what the library prescribes for learners that is important, but rather what the learners perceive and feel about what the library does. It could be argued that this learner perception factor ranked equally with several social and economic factors to explain the legendary success of public library adult education activities in the latter nineteenth century, especially in Britain.<sup>11</sup>

This learner-centered view is not based on an abdication of professional responsibility, nor on "an (erosion) of high principle."<sup>12</sup> Neither is it based on a concept of "serving patrons," which this writer feels is not only inappropriate, but dishonest in terms of professionals interacting with adult clients. Rather it is based on:

1. understanding the processes and contexts of learning;
2. recognizing that adult learners do not wait for educators;<sup>13</sup> that they exemplify the adult educator's adage that "education is too important to leave to the educators";<sup>14</sup>
3. understanding adult characteristics relevant to learning situations.<sup>15</sup>
4. accepting a developmental function in learning, as well as a task- and problem-solving one;<sup>16</sup>
5. encouraging the learner to be skilled and assertive, and to be able to assume responsibility for learning;<sup>17</sup>
6. recalling that a very significant historical contribution of many public libraries has been their planning of activities for individuals;<sup>18</sup> and
7. ensuring that interactions between library staff and clients are adapted as far as possible to individual needs, rather than being characterized by standardized or unsolicited responses.<sup>19</sup>

A learner-centered view is designed to move the focus of library-based adult education activity away from abstract, idealistic service goals that depend on an intrinsic desire to learn and an advanced stage

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of moral, intellectual and psychosocial development in each individual. Work goals for librarians instead would recognize the problem, task and prepersonal change factors which stimulate learning; they would also recognize the idiosyncratic ways in which adults learn. This view recognizes that the other end of the attitude continuum is also inappropriate for the 1980s. For example, an attitude characteristic of "the other end" would hold that "adult education is a kind of seedy activity, concerned with remedying deficiencies, making up lacks, earning more money, or painting figurines."<sup>20</sup> Certainly these examples are valid and common reasons for learning and for socializing during learning, but they now command more positive connotations. Between each end of the continuum are foci for services that spotlight realistic and differing needs for and styles of learning over the whole adult lifespan.

### **A Significant Perspective**

If it has been important to clarify some origins and characteristics of a learner-centered view, it is equally important to explain how such a significant shift in thinking could be used in librarianship. First, if its adoption can encourage more focused thinking around work objectives it may help to free public libraries from their history of argument about the scope and excellence of library-based help for adult learners. Lynn Birge's plea in 1982 for librarians "to recognize the need for planning and coherent development of a total program of adult education activities, based on specific objectives and goals" resonates with that of Darlene Weingand in 1980, and with earlier but very similar comments by Marion Hawes, Helen Lyman Smith, and Cyril Houle.<sup>21</sup>

Second, it can help to focus reactions to comments about library responses being conservative in relation to the needs of their clientele,<sup>22</sup> or of being inappropriately focused on groups, rather than individual needs.<sup>23</sup> A third reason for encouraging this significant shift in thinking and in self perception revolves around the demands of the future—the next quarter century. Weingand's Delphi study recommendations are only one library-based example of informed prediction which has serious and immediate implications for those who want to do more than react to the external forces of change.<sup>24</sup> Many of these recommendations either directly or indirectly affect the public library's work with the individual adult learner.

A fourth reason may well be associated with methods used in professional education of librarians. When these are based on a "hierarchical, authoritarian model of intellect-in-charge," library school stu-

dents have reduced scope for the development of their personal and social maturity and for self-responsibility for learning, at least compared with the use of a more interdependent, facilitative approach to learning. The traditional education model that stresses a teaching orientation, as distinct from a learning orientation, can lead to low levels of learner self-direction and reduced learner assertiveness, especially in interpersonal interactions. When learners under this model begin work as professional librarians, there is a strong probability that they will adopt a similarly hierarchical approach with their library users—they have experienced no alternative integrated styles of helping, nor have they adequate experiential-based training for interpersonal interaction that is sensitive as well as task-effective.<sup>25</sup>

Relevant service objectives cannot be specified, conservatism and financial realities cannot be confronted, or education methods improved without conviction and focused thinking. Let us assume that conviction is assured; focused thinking is a more complex activity.

### Toward the Future

The continuing usefulness of this issue of *Library Trends* will depend on how far it encourages its readers seriously to examine the concept of a learner-centered view, and to assess how far their present values and skills around helping adults contribute to the development of that view for their professional practice. Further reflection still may lead to some significant general shifts in thinking. The results of such shifts at a professional level can be understood in terms used to describe significant shifts in perspective at a personal level. Mezirow argues that the process and outcomes of significant personal change and growth involve the development of a critical awareness of one's existing assumptions, using appropriate "sustaining relationships," and then "seeing one's self and one's roles and relationships in a consistently coherent way, a way which will dictate action priorities."<sup>26</sup>

A question about 1984 and beyond is needed, especially as it draws near. In 1954 Helen Lyman Smith reported that the commitment in public libraries to the adult education movement was as vital and alive then as it was thirty years previously.<sup>27</sup> That commitment and its resulting extent of activity had enabled the library to be "recognized both inside and outside the library profession as an educational institution with a major role in the movement. The librarian [then] was recognized as an educator with the right and duty of assuming a vital active role in contrast to the passive custodial role of the past."<sup>28</sup> The

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question for 1984 becomes: To what extent can this be said of the present generation of public libraries—thirty years on?

This issue of *Library Trends* pays tribute to earlier generations of library-based adult educators, and acknowledges their evident skills and their "optimism, enthusiasm and personal dedication."<sup>29</sup> It also asks for the further development of an informed and articulated perspective shift for the present and future generations. The maturation, or as some would argue, the restoration of significant services to adult learners depends on identification of the problem or task, accurate and relevant information, critical analysis, decision making, and reflection. These are also key conditions of change, growth and learning. If they contribute to change and development in the personal learning of librarians, then they may encourage concomitant changes in practice.

Editors, like adult learners, work with others. The quality of this issue has been enhanced by the generous help given by several colleagues, but I am especially indebted to Helen Huguenor Lyman. She gave the encouragement and constructive comment that characterize a skilled helper, not just for adult learners, but also for editors.

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