

Adult Undergraduates in the Adult Education Literature: Mainstream or Marginal?

Joe F. Donaldson and Allison L. Rentfro

Abstract

We conducted a content analysis of articles published from 1990-2005 in the *Adult Education Quarterly*, *Adult Learning*, and *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education* to determine the frequency with which adult undergraduate students were the focus of the articles. Topics of these articles, as well as their type and scope, were also identified. Results of the present study were compared with earlier analyses of higher education journals in order to identify similarities and differences in the portrayal and treatment of adult students in higher education by the two fields of adult education and higher education. The adult education literature that we analyzed contained a larger proportion of articles on adult undergraduates, used a greater variety of approaches to study adult undergraduates, and demonstrated a more diverse construction of adult undergraduates' identities than higher education literature. Still, the topics considered in the two literatures were similar, which points to the need for more detailed analysis of these two fields' discourses to explore if and to what extent they construct the identity of adult undergraduates differently.

Introduction

Kasworm, Sandman, and Sissel (2000) have noted that adult undergraduates have a marginal status in research, policy, and institutional practices. This lack of attention to adult students has been well documented by a number of researchers. Pascarella and Terenzini (1998, 2005) for example, in their exhaustive reviews of college student studies, have labeled the failure of higher education scholars to focus on adult students a "substantial" research bias (1998, p. 152). Further, Quinnan (1997) has highlighted the lack of variety in research on adult learners in academe and has noted how they are treated as "other" when compared to traditional age students. Indeed, research on the journal literature of higher education has demonstrated that researchers in higher education have paid little attention to adult undergraduates (Donaldson, Townsend, & Thompson, 2004; Donaldson & Townsend, in press). But what about adult educators – how do they treat adult undergraduates in their literature? And do adult educators' portrayals of adult undergraduate students differ from the portrayals developed by those in higher education? No study has looked at these questions. Therefore, the purposes of the present research were to (a) determine the frequency with which articles on adult undergraduates appear in the adult education journal literature, (b) detail the characteristics of this literature, (c) identify the topics addressed in this literature, and (d) compare the portrayal of adult undergraduates in the adult education literature with the portrayal of these students in the higher education literature.

Conceptual Framework

This research was informed by the perspective that a field's professional literature both creates and reflects that field's reality (Gumport, 2001). Journal literature plays a role in shaping and reflecting a field's practice (Hayes, 1992). The discourse that is present (or absent) from a

field's journals also points to what counts as important or unimportant to that field and its members (Shakeshaft, 1989). As Boshier (1992) has noted, discourse is "never neutral. Some elements are included and *legitimized*; others are excluded" (p. 126). Discourse is unique to particular practice communities, constructing not only the identities of members, but also the problems they address and the procedures used to address them. Sometimes the boundaries of a practice community's discourse are clear (e.g., a classroom setting with a particular discourse). In other cases, such as the broad field of adult education, the boundaries of the discourse are less than clear and may even be contested. Multiple and hybrid discourses may also be present within a community of practice (Gee, 2005).

For the purposes of this study, we assumed that journals represent distinctive forms of discourse within a field of scholarship that also has its own discourse to which the journal discourse (as well as other texts, talk, locations, and practices) contributes. Journals are an important source of knowledge about topics in a field because journals play a role in shaping and reflecting practice (Hayes, 1992). From a practice perspective, "lack of attention to specific areas in the core literature suggests that non-specialists are not becoming aware of certain aspects" of a practice (Silverman, 1987, p. 45). Journals also provide windows into what topics and research questions scholars in the field define as important – and less important (Creamer, 1994; Taylor, 2001). Thus, "the number of publications about a topic, particularly in widely recognized journals, is an indication of the recognition of a topic, as well as a measure of its integration into mainstream research" (Creamer, 1994, p. 35). The portion of a field's discourse in its journals therefore bears greatly on the creation and maintenance of a field's approach to the study of a topic and to establishing practice conventions (Silverman, 1987). In reflecting a field, the journal literature reveals particularities about a field – its history, norms, and social structure (Taylor, 2001). Therefore, an analysis of the adult education literature provides insight not only about how adult undergraduates are treated within the field but also about how the field constructs adult undergraduate students.

Research Design and Procedures

This study employed content analysis (Krippendorff, 2003) of three adult education journals: *Adult Education Quarterly (AEQ)*, *Adult Learning (AL)*, and *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education (JCHE)*. These three journals were selected to provide analysis of literature addressed primarily to three audiences: (a) adult education scholars (*AEQ*), (b) practitioners of adult and continuing education in general (*AL*), and (c) researchers and practitioners of continuing higher education (*JCHE*). These journals were chosen since most but not all articles on adult undergraduates in these journals focused on U.S. institutions, providing a somewhat homogeneous focus. A recognized limitation of this research is lack of articles from Canadian adult education journals, as well as those from Great Britain, a focus of our future research on this topic. We also decided not to include the *Continuing Higher Education Review* since that journal changed during the mid-1990s from a refereed journal to one that included speeches and essays written by leaders in higher education and university continuing education. Other limitations were that we focused on only not-for-profit higher education and eliminated any article that addressed adult learners in career and technical education programs at community colleges.

The research had four phases. In the first we examined titles of all articles in these journals published from 1990-2005 (excluding book reviews, editorials, and program notes) to

determine if the article had a focus on adult undergraduates. We reviewed issues of *Adult Learning* through only Spring of 2004, the most recent issue of this journal. Articles were included if their titles contained one or more specific words or phrases that suggested a focus on adult undergraduates (e.g., degree program, college, nontraditional students, postsecondary education, associate degree). We relied on titles since this approach has been used successfully by others (Creamer, 1984; Hayes & Smith, 1994) and because titles provide practitioners guidance about the topic of an article, thus serving as a primary means of keeping current in their field (Burke, Ben-Ezra, Hurley, & Ruprecht, 1992) The articles were then read to determine if adult undergraduate students were indeed the focus of the article. We excluded articles if they focused, for example, on graduate students, noncredit programs, or adults in higher education who were not engaged in undergraduate study.

In the second phase we examined each article for certain characteristics: (a) type (empirical, conceptual, literature review), (b) methodology used if empirical (quantitative, qualitative, mixed), (c) scope (single institution, multiple institutions, national), and (d) definition of adult undergraduates. In the third phase we examined each article to determine the specific topic addressed by the article, relying upon inductive analysis of major content themes. In the final phase we compared the results of our analyses with the results of earlier analyses (Donaldson, et al., 2004; Donaldson & Townsend, in press) of articles in higher education journals, as updated by us to include articles in these journals through 2005. The higher education journals reviewed in the earlier analyses included (a) *Journal of Higher Education*, (b) *The Review of Higher Education*, (c) *Research in Higher Education*, (d) *Journal of College Student Development*, (e) *NASPA Journal*, (f) *Community College Review*, and (g) *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*. In all phases we examined each article independently. Differences were discussed until complete agreement was achieved.

Findings

Adult undergraduates were the focus of 72 (6.14%) of the 1,173 articles in the three adult education journals published from 1990 through 2005. In contrast to this finding, only 1.16% of the 3,694 articles published in the seven higher education journals focused on adult undergraduates. The lowest percentage of articles on adult undergraduates in the adult education journals was found in *Adult Learning* (2.3%), while the highest percentage was found in the *Journal of Continuing Higher Education* (18.7%). Thirteen (5.88%) of *Adult Education Quarterly* articles focused on adult undergraduate students. No particular variation in the pattern of publication in the three journals was evident over the sixteen years.

Type and Methodology

Most articles in *Adult Education Quarterly* (92%) and *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education* (73.8%) were empirical. Only one article (5.9%) in *Adult Learning* was empirical; others in this journal focused on principles of practice or program descriptions. Of the 44 empirical articles in the adult education literature, 15 (34.1%) used qualitative, 24 (54.6%) quantitative, three (6.8%) mixed, and two (4.6%) historical research methodologies. The adult education empirical literature was much more dependent upon qualitative methodologies than the higher education literature (3%). In fact, the adult education empirical literature used more varied approaches than research in the higher education literature which depended heavily upon quantitative methodologies (78.8%) in studies of adult undergraduate students.

Scope

The bulk of studies in the adult education literature (63.6%) was conducted at single institutions; data from two or more institutions were used in 11(25%) of the studies. National data were used in only five (11.4%) of the studies. The pattern in the scope of studies was similar to what was found for the higher education literature where the single institution, multiple institution, and national foci were respectively 69.7%, 12.1%, and 18.2%.

Adult Students Defined

Most authors of articles in the adult education literature used age as a distinguishing characteristic of adulthood, with the age of 25 years or more, followed by 24 years or more, being the most frequently employed age criterion. However, a number of authors defined adult students in terms of being out of school for five or more years, being enrolled in degree completion or other specially designed programs for adults, or being defined as adult by others – for example in the analysis of the portrayal of adults in night school in fictional literature (Pittman, 1992). However, authors of over 25% of the articles in the adult education literature simply labeled the students about which they were writing as “adult,” leaving a definition of adult undergraduate students to readers’ discretion – assuming we suspect that the readers shared a common understanding of what constituted an adult. In contrast, the authors of the higher education literature relied much more heavily upon the age criterion, with a majority using 25 year of age or older as the criterion (Donaldson, et al., 2004).

The definition or meaning of adult undergraduates was however more varied in the adult education literature than in the higher education literature. For example, several studies in the adult education literature focused exclusively on women and people of color, while the higher education literature contained no article that focused exclusively on minority adult students and only a few that focused exclusively on women (Donaldson et al., 2004).

Topics

The articles in both the adult education and higher education literature focused in very broad relief on three major categories of topics: (a) institutional /macro issues dealing with access, participation, and retention, attitudes toward adult students, and the meaning of adult and nontraditional students, (b) process issues that included adult experiences in and out of the classroom, the needs of adult students, and services provided to adults by higher education institutions, and (c) student learning outcomes, including affective, cognitive and other types of college outcomes. The proportion of these three major categories did not differ appreciably between the literature of adult education and the literature of higher education. However, a more finely grained analysis did reveal some differences. Authors of adult education articles, for example, were more concerned about issues of access (18.1% of all articles) as compared to authors of the higher education articles (7%). In contrast, higher education authors (16.3%) were more focused on retention than authors of articles in the three adult education journals (11.1%). Authors of articles in the adult education journals were somewhat more interested in learning outcomes than authors of articles in the higher education journals, and this was particularly the case for outcomes that were more varied and disparate than just cognitive ones.

Comparison with Higher Education Literature

The adult education literature focusing on adult undergraduates differed in three important ways from the higher education literature. First, a larger percentage of articles in the

adult education literature focused on adult students. Second, the adult education research was more balanced between qualitative and quantitative approaches. Third, the adult education literature included articles on adult students of color, while the higher education literature contained no articles on minority students. Despite these differences, research in these two literatures was primarily limited to studies at single institutions, and topics addressed in both literatures were strikingly similar.

Conclusions

Not surprisingly adult educators demonstrate more interest in adult undergraduate students than their counterparts in higher education. In addition, they appear to treat and portray adult undergraduates as a more diverse group than researchers in higher education who tend to treat adult students as a highly homogeneous group, especially when comparing adult learners to traditional-aged college students (Donaldson & Townsend, in press). The adult educators' use of more varied approaches to studying adult undergraduates, especially the use of qualitative methodologies to gain deeper understanding of the range of experiences adults have in higher education, probably contributes to these differences between these two literatures. It is also not that surprising that adult educators focused more on access and higher educators more on retention, given the former's historic concern about the topic of participation, and the latter's interest in helping institutions understand how best to retain the students they have.

Despite these differences, the topics addressed in both literatures were relatively similar. This conclusion raises questions about whether adult educators possess a unique discourse about adult students in higher education or whether adult educators have constructed a discourse that varies only slightly from the higher education discourse about adult learners in the academy. The similarity or difference in these two discourses is a critically important topic since adult education discourse plays an important role for the field, for practitioners, and for higher education scholars in constructing the identity of adult undergraduate students. Are adult students "other," different, and more needful and deficient when compared to traditional age students? Or, are adult students individuals who also belong in the academy and enrich it by virtue of their presence?

While the content analysis of this adult education literature, and comparison of our findings with earlier ones about the higher education literature, has provided some insight about how adult undergraduates are constructed and portrayed in the literature, the study has also raised additional questions. For example, would the portrayal be similar if Canadian and British journals were added to the analysis? How would the discourse about adult learners be characterized if the adult education literature was analyzed using Donaldson and Townsend's (in press) "Classification of Scholarly Discourse about Adult Undergraduate Students?" How does the construction of adult undergraduates' identities in the adult education literature differ from their construction in the higher education scholarly literature? And finally, is the research identity of adult undergraduates the same as the identity that is constructed by practitioners as they go about their work with adult undergraduates in institutions of higher education?

References

- Boshier, R. (1992). Popular discourse concerning AIDS: Its implications for adult education. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 42, 125-135.

- Buhrke, R. A., Ben-Ezra, L. A., Hurley, M. E., & Ruprecht, L. J. (1992). Content analysis and methodological critique of articles concerning lesbian and gay male issues in counseling journals. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 39*(1), 91-99.
- Creamer, E. G. (1994). Gender and publications in core higher education journals. *Journal of College Student Development, 35*(1), 35-39.
- Donaldson, J. F., & Townsend, B. K. (in press). Higher education journals' discourse about adult undergraduate students. *Journal of Higher Education*.
- Donaldson, J. F., Townsend, B. T., & Thompson, R. W. (2004). Adult undergraduates in higher education journals: A marginal and insecure status. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education, 52* (3), 13-23.
- Gee, J. P. (2005). *An introduction to discourse analysis: Theory and method* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Gumport, P. J. (2001). Built to serve: The enduring legacy of public higher education. In P. G. Altbach, P. J. Gumport, & D. B. Johnstone (Eds.), *In defense of American higher education* (pp. 85-109). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press.
- Hayes, E. (1992). The impact of feminism on adult education publications: An analysis of British and American journals. *International Journal of Lifelong Education, 11*(2), 125-138.
- Hayes, E. R., & Smith, L. (1994). Women in adult education: An analysis of perspectives in major journals. *Adult Education Quarterly, 44*(4), 201-21.
- Kasworm, C. E., Sandmann, L. R., & Sissel, P. A. (2000). Adult learners in higher education. In A. L. Wilson & E. R. Hays, (Eds.), *Handbook of adult and continuing education, New edition* (pp. 449-463). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Krippendorff, K. (2003). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (1998). Studying college students in the 21st century: Meeting new challenges. *The Review of Higher Education, 21*(2), 151-165.
- Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (2005). *How college affects students: A third decade of research* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Pittman, V. (1992). Outsiders in academe: Night school students in American fiction. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education, 40*(2), 8-13.
- Quinnan, T. W. (1997). *Adult students "at risk:" Culture bias in higher education*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.
- Shakeshaft, C. (1989). The gender gap in research in educational administration. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 25*, 324-337.
- Silverman, R. J. (1987). How we know what we know: A study of higher education journal articles. *Review of Higher Education, 11*, 39-59.
- Taylor, E. W. (2001). *Adult Education Quarterly* from 1989 to 1999: A content analysis of all submissions. *Adult Education Quarterly, 51*(4), 322-40.

Joe F. Donaldson, Professor, Higher & Continuing Education, University of Missouri-Columbia, 202 Hill Hall, Columbia, MO 65211, donaldsonj@missouri.edu
 Allison L. Rentfro, Director of Continuing Medical Education, University of Missouri-Columbia, 2401 Lemone Indust. Blvd., Columbia, MO 65212, rentfroa@health.missouri.edu
 Presented at the Midwest Research-to-Practice Conference in Adult, Continuing, and Community Education, University of Missouri-St. Louis, MO, October 4-6, 2006