

## **History of Adult Learning in Canada**

Adult learning in Canada and around the world since the Second World War owes a great deal to a handful of Canadians who continue to provide leadership today.

Although adult education has been practised in Canada since the early 19th century, it wasn't until after the war that it developed its own formal field of study.

In 1945, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) was created. Countries participating at a world conference on education and culture shared repugnance of the terrible cruelty and inhumanity wrought by totalitarian regimes during the war. Participants sought an organization that would embody a culture of peace and security "by promoting collaboration among the nations through education, science and culture in order to further universal respect for justice, for the rule of law and for ... human rights and fundamental freedoms."

The first international conference on adult education, CONFINTEA I, was organized by UNESCO in Elsinore, Denmark, in 1949. It brought together educators and ministers of education from countries around the world to discuss the need for international cooperation in promoting adult education.

At the time, many parts of the world were still recovering from the war's devastation, while developing nations were struggling to get a toehold on economic development. In Canada, meanwhile, academics and educators were tapping into new ideas and exploring new fields of study.

James Robbins (Roby) Kidd was the first Canadian to complete a doctorate in adult education—at New York's Columbia University in 1947. He became a leader in the movement to recognize adult education as a field of academic study and he was an early believer in the need for international cooperation.

### **The capacity to learn and grow**

In 1950, Roby became the second president of the Canadian Association for Adult Education, which had been founded in 1935. (See sidebar on his successor, Alan Thomas.) He also created the Overseas Book Centre, a non-governmental foreign assistance venture in Canada, which shipped books to developing countries.

From 1961 to 1966, Roby was chairman of UNESCO's International Committee for the Advancement of Adult Education, which endorsed lifelong learning, and he organized and chaired the second CONFINTEA conference in Montréal in 1960.

In 1965, he was founding chair of Canada's first Department of Adult Education, at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE). That department was the academic base that provided him and other Canadians with a springboard into exciting new roles in the expanding field. Roby was founding editor in 1968 of *Convergence*, a major international journal for adult educators and learners. He also helped to establish the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE), based in Toronto, and was its

secretary-general from 1973 to 1979. ICAE is an international partnership of individuals and organizations whose mission is to promote adult learning as an important tool for informed participation in civil society and sustainable development.

Roby's successor at ICAE was Budd Hall, also a Canadian. During the early 1970s, Budd had worked at the Institute for Adult Education in Dar es Salaam, alongside Tanzania's President Julius Nyerere. In post-colonial Africa, Julius was an educator himself and a forceful advocate for lifelong learning, human rights and the right to equality in learning.

### **A new area: participatory research**

Roby recruited Budd to join ICAE in 1975. At the time, Budd was exploring a new area of research in adult education, which he called "participatory research," or community-based research. In a departure from traditional research methods, he saw the community as participating in research and finding solutions that were realistic and sustainable.

In 1979, Budd became secretary-general of ICAE and remained in that position until 1991. In 1990, under Budd's leadership, ICAE proposed and supported the United Nations International Year of Literacy.

As well, Budd was a professor at OISE for 23 years and chair of the Adult Education department from 1993 to 2001. From 2001 to 2006, he was dean of Education at the University of Victoria, and now is director of the university's Office of Community-Based Education.

Paul Bélanger is another important player in modern thought about adult learning—not only in his native Quebec and elsewhere in Canada, but around the world. Paul worked as a researcher at the Institut canadien pour l'éducation des adultes in Montréal from 1968 to 1972, and from then until 1984 was the institute's executive director. (This organization is now called the Institut de coopération pour l'éducation des adultes; see sidebar on Émile Ollivier, one of its other past presidents.)

From 1989 to 2000, he was director of the UNESCO Institute for Education in Hamburg, Germany. He led UNESCO in developing International Adult Learners' Week, a celebration of adult learning that has been adopted in more than 40 countries.

Paul also organized and served as secretary-general of the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA V), held in Hamburg in 1997.

In 2000, Paul became president of the International Council of Adult Education. The ICAE, which originally had its headquarters in Toronto, has since moved to Montevideo, Uruguay.

### **“A planet of learners”**

Paul continues as president of the International Council for Adult Education, which helped organize the International Adult Learners' Forum. At CONFINTEA VI in December 2009, he gave the closing day keynote address. In his speech “From Rhetoric to Action,” Paul referred to the international conference on climate change being held in Copenhagen. He said that adult learning was integral to the survival of the planet, “to transform our way of living, of producing and consuming.”

Paul said, “The planet will not survive unless it becomes a planet of learners.”

And so, adult learning will continue to evolve in the world, and Canadian researchers will share in its progress.

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