REVIEW ESSAY

Adult Literacy Practitioner and Theorist:
the writings of George Demetrion

The national funding agency for libraries in the United States, the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), thrived under the leadership of Robert S. Martin (Berry). Martin spoke often at professional conferences during the period 2001-2005 on the centrality of education to the library mission. Martin stated:

Never forget that the primary mission of the library is supporting and facilitating the transfer of knowledge: libraries are fundamentally about knowledge and education. Let us return to the center of our professional existence, revitalize the discourse of librarianship, and bring a sharper focus to our educational enterprise. (Martin, 2001).

Why is there such little general understanding among librarians of the educational role of the public library when it has long been a basis of the library’s rationale and, as shown by recent IMLS budgets and mission statements, has provided the impetus for additional funding?

The long history of public librarians providing adult education and literacy support has been outlined by Peggy Barber and myself. In our essay, we note with concern the lack of connection between library practice and adult educators. Since the advent of the internet, citations in the library literature that address the provision of adult education have nearly disappeared. Very few faculty teaching librarians develop courses using the literature of adult education.

The growing strength of the capitalist class has had a negative effect on adult education. The distribution of life chances decreases as the power of the organized working class decreases (Rubenson, 2005). Literacy has been appropriated by politician’s wives as a lady bountiful sort of activity with small grants going to feel-good projects through programs such as the Barbara Bush Foundation. There is simply no literature in librarianship to address the theory and the context of adult education, and we have been bought off by literacy programs funded by corporations. Librarians have become part of the “learn to earn” movement rather than holding a richer “learn to live” motivation.
To understand the intellectual and philosophical basis of adult education, librarians would benefit by turning to the writing of George Demetrion, director of adult literacy programming in Hartford, Connecticut. In Demetrion’s 2005 paper, Between the Life of the Mind and the World of Action: Explorations into Consciousness, Pedagogy, Politics, and Scientific Philosophy in Adult Education, he observes:

While I remain perplexed in many ways, the effort to more clearly understand the dynamic of the field through a simultaneous embrace of the logic of my field-based practice and theory construction, and to make concrete improvements wherever possible in either realm, continues. (Demetrion, 2005)

Demetrion has written many articles and essays that examine the role of adult literacy in the life of the United States. Some of his topics are the work of John Dewey and Paulo Freire; the question of how adult literacy can affect a person’s sense of inclusion, well-being, and growth; Henry Giroux on the relationship of schooling to society; and the difference between the perspectives of adult learners and policy makers.

George Demetrion has addressed these issues in full in his monograph, Conflicting Paradigms in Adult Literacy Education: In Quest of a U.S. Democratic Politics of Literacy (2005b). Demetrion’s historical review of adult education over the last 20 years provides a convincing argument for a stronger commitment to democracy in society-at-large. His audience is adult educators, educational policy makers, legislators, college students, and librarians.

Adult literacy has become hostage to a workforce model. Librarians who work with literacy providers may wonder why literacy is not a central policy focus. In George Demetrion’s clear and insightful book the workforce readiness model prevalent in the U.S. is explained. I have found this approach inimical, for the most part, to librarians’ commitment to human capabilities. Demetrion helps us all to learn that there are alternative models that motivate and give meaning to adult literacy, and he gives us the intellectual tools to implement them – if we have the will.

Works Cited

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review essay by Kathleen de la Peña McCook