



## *Reflections*

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# **Reflecting on the Past: Observations on Change and Reality**

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*“For me adult education is about critically assessing our reality, to name that reality, to devise strategies through adult education to change that reality, and to help students to do the same thing” (Cunningham as cited in Hill, 2009, para. 7).*

**M**y reality when I returned to school to finish my undergraduate degree was a single mother trying to make a better life for my daughter. My goal was simple – a job in a corporation in the area of training and development. I planned out my course work to take six terms, which it did. Faculty encouraged me to earn a master’s degree. The first time I heard the term “adult education” was in 1991 when I noticed an introduction to adult education course was listed as an elective for the master’s degree in labor and human resources I was earning. What I learned in this course was amazing! Finally, I had language to articulate the values I held about the world, such as social justice, and a context for some of the historical events and people I knew about, such as the Freedom Riders and Bob Moses (Moses & Cobb, 2001). After observing my passion for higher education, the business faculty encouraged me to apply for a doctorate, which I did, but to their surprise, the doctoral program was in adult education. As I would later come to know, human resource development (HRD) practice was considered “sleeping with the enemy” (Cunningham, 1993, p. 13). The enemy was corporate America where people were human resources to be used and disposed of like material resources (Schied, 1995) and so I learned HRD was an entity that needed change and that adult education would provide the tools.

In 1993, I attended the Adult Education Research Conference (AERC) for the first time which was hosted by Penn State University. People were very upset that year about the publication of the black and blue book (Peters & Jarvis, 1991). The editors of the book were charged with providing an update on the state of graduate adult education (Sheared & Sissel, 2001). A special feminist caucus was convened to discuss women’s concerns with the book. The issue was that the book was “Eurocentric, racist, gender insensitive, elitist, and exclusionary” (Cunningham, 2001, p. xi), and did not provide an update on the field since it covered white men’s knowledge and excluded the contributions of women, racial, sexual, and ethnic minorities and alternative ways of knowing. The discussion in the feminist caucus was boisterous and inspiring! It was a disorderly meeting where voices could be heard demanding space for the knowledge and contributions of people who did not represent the status quo. As a brand new doctoral student, this was my introduction to Phyllis Cunningham, Peggy Sissel, Vanessa Sheared, and Juanita

Johnson-Bailey. Ten years later, *Making Space: Merging Theory and Practice in Adult Education* (Sheared & Sissel, 2001) was published as a response to the black and blue book. The journey to publish *Making Space* is described in the book. It is worth mentioning that the paid staff of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE) blocked the book. It “label[ed] it as unimportant and uninteresting” (Sissel & Sheared, 2001, p. 8) after the editors went through channels to have the project sanctioned by AAACE. AAACE succeeded in delaying publication of the book for ten years, ensuring *Making Space* was not published by the principle publishing house for adult education books, Jossey-Bass.

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It is ironic that my introduction to the controversies embedded in adult education was actually through the AERC. The course I took in my master’s degree gave me the false impression that the field historically had been concerned with equity and social justice. As I was to learn, the African American Pre-conference began in 1991 when I was taking my first adult education course even though the field is decades older. The Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer and Allies (LGBTQA) caucus was initiated by Bob Hill in 1993 and met with much resistance (Grace & Hill, 2004), but it was not until 2003 when the first LGBTQA pre-conference was held at AERC in San Francisco.

In 1994, the AERC was held in Knoxville, TN. What was most memorable from that conference was Phyllis Cunningham sitting on stage with Jack Mezirow and others loudly proclaiming that white men needed to deconstruct their privilege. She went on to make a biting remark about John Ohliger’s treatment by Ohio State, which upset David Boggs. Boggs was the person hired after Ohliger and who introduced me to Ohliger’s writing (see Grace & Rocco, 2009). On the drive home from this conference a fellow student and I reflected on the notion of deconstructing privilege. The result of this was two terrified new Ohio State students deciding it was high time that white folks, male and female, deconstructed their privilege (Rocco & West, 1998). It might seem odd to those who know me now that I was afraid to set out on a journey to deconstruct privilege but we were students afraid of reprisals.

The next AERC I attended in 1996 hosted by the University of South Florida was memorable for the treatment the African Diaspora Pre-conference and the LGBTQA caucus received at the hands of the conference hosts. In the middle of a presentation on the Million Man March, the door to the room opened and we were told that there had been a mistake with scheduling and we had to vacate the room. Scipio Collins rose and eloquently responded that we were not going anywhere. Scipio could tell you off like a preacher doing a sermon and it was spellbinding. Phyllis Cunningham was there for back-up. When she told you off it was intimidating, breathtaking, and scary. The hosts did not stand a chance. The LGBTQA organizer, Bob Hill, simply wanted flyers put into the welcome packets for attendees or placed on the registration table where attendees could pick one up. He was told “no” and blocked at every turn. We still met. Social justice, equity, and respect it seemed were not values all adult educators embraced.

The LGBTQA caucus and pre-conference continued to have difficulties in terms of support from the field (Grace & Hill, 2004). Unfortunately, scholars of African descent, those who write about race and the intersection of race with other attributes, and those who write about LGBTQ issues and experiences consistently met with barriers, which we often found ways around. The perseverance of scholars interested in social justice for racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities has produced a number of *New Directions* issues around these topics and few books. However, Jossey-Bass, the publisher of many mainstream adult education books, who has published work on diversity and higher education, has few books on minority experiences in adult education. Even at the time of writing this paper, I searched Jossey-Bass’ Higher & Adult Education website using the word minority or LGBTQ (in any combination) and no books appear. When I used the word “race”, *The Handbook of Race and Adult*

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*Education* (Sheared, Johnson-Bailey, Colin III, Peterson, & Brookfield, 2010) appears alone. Some adult education scholars have published books on the black or gay experience with other publishers not as well known (Hill & Grace, 2009), but this work only represents a small fraction of adult education literature. This seems to indicate that past attitudes and values that made it so difficult for foundational work like *Making Space* to be published still invades our present scholarship and, as a result, corrupts our future. When futures look bleak, here comes a new initiative like *Dialogues in*

*Social Justice: An Adult Education Journal* making a way around the barriers, making space for the silenced voices and the voices people do not want to listen to, and providing hope for the future. Readers should be aware of the significance of this turning point in adult education history. Hopefully, the reality of adult education will change with the publication of *Dialogues in Social Justice*.

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## Biography



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