

**Reflections on the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education
(CONFINTEA V)
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As a peak body in Australian adult education NOW in FE was granted observer status for CONFINTEA V. Jill Sanguinetti and Sue Shore traveled to Hamburg to represent the activities and views of the organization and to network with similar feminist organizations from around the world.

Every ten to twelve years UNESCO sponsors an international conference on adult education. In July 1997 the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA V) was held in Hamburg, Germany, and the public focus of the conference was to finalize a *Declaration of Adult Learning* and an *Agenda for the Future* both of which are intended to chart a framework for the relationship between a just and civil society, and adult learning into the new millennium. Of course the conference itself marked only one step in the long and complex path to develop these documents. Those of you who have been following the preparations for CONFINTEA V may have discovered drafts of the documents on the web (<http://www.education.unesco.org/confintea>). Final amendments are yet to be ratified but the draft versions agreed to by the Hamburg forum are currently available on this same web page.

1948: Elsinore
1960: Montreal
1972: Tokyo
1985: Paris
1997: Hamburg

In the preceding year preparatory meetings for CONFINTEA V were held throughout the world drawing together key stakeholders in the various regions to identify issues they were grappling with locally. In fact this conference was quite innovative in its support of NGOs, both within the body of the main conference and as key stakeholders in the regional and thematic preparations. In the past NGOs may have been represented in government delegations to UNESCO conferences however this conference gave weight to the voices of NGOs within the same debating forum, unlike for example the Beijing women's conference, which established a structure of parallel conferences for government and NGO delegations. The implications of this strategy are that NGOs and government delegations participate directly in debate with each other: voting rights however are still vested in the government delegation.

Thematic groups

1. Adult learning and democracy: the challenges of the twenty-first century
2. Improving the conditions and quality of adult learning
3. Ensuring the universal right to literacy and basic education
4. Adult learning, gender equality and equity, and empowerment of women
5. Adult learning and the changing world of work
6. Adult learning in relation to environment, health and population
7. Adult learning, culture, media and new information technologies
8. Adult learning for all: the potential of different groups
9. The economics of adult learning
10. Enhancing international co-operation and solidarity

Many participants wanted to recognize this significant departure from other UNESCO forums, yet also recognized as Lalita Ramdas, the President of the International Council of Adult Education pointed out, the mere presence of the NGOs made the process somewhat unwieldy, indeed uncomfortable at times, for those who preferred a more streamlined process. On the other hand many NGOs were frustrated and at times angry, at the way in which some sleight of hand had rendered invisible many of their recommendations for the final draft. This was one aspect of the conference which was both bewildering and irritating. The mechanisms of UNESCO are complex, at times invisible, so while member countries did not vote on the final drafts they were asked to 'look to the spirit' of the document and show agreement by clapping. While this seemed a practical solution at the time it also highlights the difficulties of challenging a process for which so many people have seemed to work so hard to reach consensus. Indeed as with many of the processes which sought agreement one would have seemed like a chronic malcontent to have asked for additional exploration,

or have requested further amendments (besides the 400 or so officially tabled) to address some of the tensions inherent in a document imbued with liberal humanism.

As I worked my way through the week I began to realize the enormous number of contradictions inherent in a process which attempts to offer a coherent view of adult learning across the 150 member states, 500 NGOs and 200 institutions and foundations present at CONFINTEA V. In addition much of the official work of the conference took place in an enormous auditorium which hosed in typical UNESCO fashion the delegates in alphabetical order of country, with NGOs seated in the balcony. The setup did little to encourage dialogue however this did not stop delegates from engaging in furious networking, redrafting and lobbying outside the formal sessions.

The conference was about much more than listening to speeches although this in itself was hard work given the international context of the forum. I was reminded of other conferences I had attended where, although English was a major means of communication, there were at any time some 5 or 6 additional languages of official translation and many, many more which made up the unofficial translation network. I was reminded of the stark differences between agendas of the various countries and the differing degrees of involvement people had had in the lead up to CONFINTEA V. Some feminist NGOs were immediately involved in the drafting of the documents - although they too were surprised at omissions in the drafts distributed for discussion once we arrived in Hamburg.

At times I was surprised at the Anglocentric reactions of many English language speakers who expressed frustration at the work involved in attending to translations, or the assumption that one could forget transcription machines and still expect a professional translation, or that a summary from a colleague who didn't even speak the language of translation would do. These small incidents made me reflect on the arrogance of some English language speakers and their (implicit) assumption that English could serve as the dominant vehicle for the conference.

Then there were the serendipitous meetings with activists, particularly feminist activists, who wanted to share stories about their own countries and find out what was happening in Australia. Jill Sanguinetti and I talked up NOW in FE during all these sessions highlighting the strengths of the Network and the importance of being invited to participate in CONFINTEA V as the only significant Australian feminist presence, and as a major stakeholder within Australian adult education.

I was pleased to be able to talk to other academics about the development of programs for adult educators in other countries and realized some of the stark differences between our work here in Australia and the UK, Canadian and USA situation. In Australia we have a history of undergraduate training or adult educators which is almost non-existent in these other countries. For them adult education training in universities usually comes after the completion of an undergraduate degree. Other people talked of the rich relationship some of their universities had with adult education programs - in these instances the universities actually provided outreach programs and served the same purpose as many of our community providers here in Australia.

In addition the conference reflected the themes of the International Commission on Education report *Learning: The Treasure Within*, which draws attention to the important links between lifelong learning and 'personal and social development'. During the Hamburg proceedings I was struck by the number of times adult education was linked to 'sustainable human development, poverty eradication, job creation . . . good governance, transparency, democracy, affirmation of human rights, equity, justice, conflict resolution and peace (Closing Address by Federico Mayor, Director General UNESCO). While not wanting to wallow in cynicism I think these kinds of 'savior' discourses present enormous challenges for feminist educators who 'operate in the teeth of a system for whom racism and sexism are primary, established, necessary props for profit' (Audre Lorde cited in Thompson, 1983, 133).

The conference reminded me that globalisation, while often presented in an expansionist and individually empowering frame, can also result in poverty for those who are unable to compete on the world stage. Maria Khan, Secretary-General for ASPBAE summarized responses to the Declaration and the Agenda from the Asia Pacific region noting the tensions inherent in education programs framed within economic models which promote an 'unbridled quest for growth'. She reiterated the

need to question this growth model - a pretty serious challenge if you have ever tried it in the context of Australia's current economic climate - as well the problem of marginalised groups in the educational process being "pitted" against each other.

Throughout much of the conference equity concerns were apparent but it was not always clear what models of equity provided the underpinnings for activism. There was, even in these surrounds, a discourse of harmony around difference which seemed to give little attention to the profound disparities between "cultures", and the hard work required to "negotiate" difference. While some groups talked of women in simplistic terms, I was pleased to see recognition of the importance of feminist analyses of education, the need to recognize and work across and around our differences, and the importance of hearing what feminism means to the many groups of women around the world. It was a pleasure to be in a forum which took women's participation seriously, if at times then watering down the strength of that message through the liberal discourses inherent in the mechanisms of the drafting process.

I saw first hand the enormous energy and commitment of women in particular who used a visible women's caucus everyday to lodge changes to the Agenda and the Declaration and lobbied government delegations to support the amendments when it came time to vote. But I was also curious about the emphasis in the women's caucus on process and during some of the meetings I attended I wondered how this attention to process might replicate some of the very bureaucratic structures the women were trying to resist.

I was struck again, as I was at the preparatory conference for CONFINTEA V in Darwin, by the use of the term 'capacity building' and feel it offers a richness as well as strategic focus which might serve NGOs well here in Australia. I was heartened by the goodwill towards NOW in FE and the number of women in Canada, the Philippines and the UK who knew of us, and the women in the US, Africa and Europe who wanted to make connections. One way we have begun to do this is by sharing newsletters. The NOW in FE Executive have also been provided with names and contacts from Africa, Canada, the UK, the Philippines and South America to follow up programs and possibilities for further networking.

After such an enormous gathering of people claiming serious interest in adult education one could well ask What was it all for? and What happens next? Like much policy work the *Declaration of Adult Learning* and the *Agenda for the Future* provide a visible wrapping to the face of adult education activities, but my sense is that much hard work will need to follow if we are to maintain the momentum and political commitment generated by CONFINTEA V within some countries. It is fair to say I think that for many countries this event passed them by and we should ask questions about why this might be so.

In Australia the language of the CONFINTEA V forum and lifelong learning contrasts starkly with some of the more instrumental versions of vocational education and training. I came away feeling enriched for having been connected to a strong and vibrant community of feminist educators who, despite all odds persist in claiming space for feminism within the boundaries of adult and vocational education.

Delors, Jacques (1996) *Learning: The Treasure Within*. Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century. Paris: UNESCO Publishing

Thompson, Jane (1983) *Learning Liberation: Women's Responses to Men's Education*. London: Croom Helm.