



# **PATHWAYS**

of Adult Learning

Professional and  
Education Narratives

**JANET GROEN**  
and  
**COLLEEN KAWALILAK**



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**JANET GROEN and  
COLLEEN KAWALILAK**

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## **Pathways of Adult Learning: Professional and Education Narratives**

by Janet Groen and Colleen Kawalilak

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# Preface

You have picked up this book for a reason! Perhaps this is required reading for a course you are taking or teaching in a post-secondary or continuing education context. Or you may be an instructor, learner, or leader (formal or informal) in another work and learning context—someone who facilitates the learning of adults—and you seek a deeper understanding as to how adults learn.

You may be a nurse, social worker, teacher, instructor at a community or vocational college, community worker, human resource consultant, training and development specialist, sports coach, career counsellor, or art teacher at a community recreation centre. Regardless of how we identify and where we are located, we assume, unless we are working in complete isolation, that our work and learning involves being with other adults and engaging in ongoing, formal professional development or informal learning activities. If any of these roles or contexts resonates with you, what you are interested in, or what you hope to do in the future, we invite you to participate in a conversation—a dialogue—as we reflect, make meaning of, and navigate our individual and collective pathways as lifelong adult learners.

On this journey, we will explore the exciting and often challenging diverse work and learning terrains that we navigate. It is also important to recognize that so much of our learning extends beyond the bricks and mortar of formal, traditional, educational, learning environments. In fact, the majority of our learning occurs beyond these walls. There is potential for learning whenever we pick up a book, watch a TV documentary, attend a continuing education class, collaborate with neighbours on a community initiative, or stop in the hallway at work to chat with a colleague about a project or to share an idea. These are only a few examples of the limitless invitations extended to us as adult learners. Most important is that we recognize that *we are all adult learners*. We

will continue to repeat this throughout this text. Our hope is that we will gain a deepened and expanded awareness and appreciation of the potential for individual and collective learning by reflecting what we have learned *along the way*, through our experiences.

In order for this conversation to be meaningful and authentic, we, the authors, are committed to creating a space that invites personal reflection. This book, then, while informed by scholarly literature on adult education and adult learning, will have a personal and relational tone. We aim to achieve this by speaking directly to you in first-person narrative and as co-learners on this journey. We intentionally do this because we believe that scholarly, academic writing does not need to be removed, distant, or inaccessible from our day-to-day, lived, and applied experiences and understandings. Too often, as readers, we struggle to make an untenable leap from what we are reading in a textbook to relevance in our day-to-day lives. Simply put, we seek to make meaning of theories that inform adult learning by intertwining theories with stories, voices, and experiences.

These stories, voices, and experiences are animated in several ways throughout the book. First, we offer our own narratives of learning so that we may introduce ourselves as co-learners to you, the reader, and to emphasize the potential and possibilities for learning, individually and collectively, in a variety of personal, professional, and educational contexts. Second, we invited several graduate students, past and present, from the Adult Learning specialization program in the Werklund School of Education at the University of Calgary, to share their own narratives of learning. These featured student narratives were carefully selected to represent varied experiences, and multiple perspectives and contexts of adult learning. Finally, voices from the field offer succinct and timely commentaries on concepts and themes presented. These voices represent colleagues whose expertise we continue to draw from, individuals who have exhibited leadership in particular areas of adult education within Canadian higher education and post-secondary contexts. We would also like to acknowledge many voices that *have not* been individually highlighted in this text. We refer to adult educators and practitioners

who continue to contribute significantly to our field of scholarship and practice. We all benefit from your ongoing commitment and contributions. In all honesty, it was simply not possible to highlight all of the good work that is currently going on in Canada. It is our hope, however, that the voices represented in the pages that follow provide a valuable lens through which to better understand and appreciate the rapidly growing and ever-changing landscape of adult education research and practice.

We hope that the personal and relational tone conveyed through student narratives of learning, our own personal stories, and voices from the field provides you, co-learners in this learning journey, the opportunity to see yourselves in some of these narratives and to make connections between the theoretical concepts presented and the various contexts and dimensions of adult learning.

We begin this text by focusing on *who we are as adult learners*. In addition to our diverse work and learning contexts, we all juggle many roles in our lives. Are we members of a sports team or singing group? What roles and responsibilities do we have in our social networks? Are we parents, grandparents, siblings, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, and so forth? Do we volunteer, mentor, or participate in any group or team activities? Perhaps we are members of a book club, gourmet gathering, quilting group, hiking group, or rock-climbing club. Within any of these roles and contexts, there is great potential for learning, co-creating knowledge, and knowledge sharing. Wherever we are located, it is important to acknowledge this potential and to remain open to possibility. We then spiral out to extend the conversation into areas that explore philosophies and history of adult education, theories of adult learning, and diverse paid and unpaid work and learning contexts. Throughout, we integrate a critical lens to explore how sociocultural and socioeconomic influences and experiences shape, inform, and influence our learning journeys.

We begin with a touching reflection written by Judith Duerk (1993). Judith invites us to spiral back to our early school experiences, a time when we were open and hungry to learn, a time when we were fascinated with learning and all of its possibilities:

How might your life have been different if, late one afternoon, near the end of the summer, as you thought of the opening of school ... and of trying, again, to learn to use our mind in traditional ways ... something wondrous had happened?

If [those] who were your teachers had invited their young ... students ... even the littlest girls [and boys] ... to come to sit in a circle ... and, of course, you went, too.

If you had sensed the excitement in the voices of the teachers as they spoke of a different way to use your fine, young minds. And you could feel the wonder of [your teachers] sitting in a circle, under the open sky, just outside the school ... gathered to share their wisdom with the younger [ones] in their care.

*How might your life be different?* (p. 67)



# About the Authors

We met 10 years ago, as newly minted assistant professors; we have been dialoguing ever since! In the early years, we shared experiences and perspectives and grappled with the many challenges we attempted to navigate along the way, as new academics. This was new terrain and we were comforted to know that our individual struggles were shared, appreciated, and understood by the other. Through dialogue, we came to know that experiences we had gained, prior to becoming assistant professors, had much to offer if we took the time to critically reflect on these experiences, explore for meaning, and discern past learning and linkages with this new work and learning environment that we now found ourselves in. Through dialogue, we also deepened our understanding of adult education and adult learning—of the history, philosophical beliefs, and underpinnings that informed our work—and of what it means to be a lifelong adult learner. These are some of the topics we take up in the chapters that follow and we invite you to join our ongoing exploration and conversation.

Our most recent endeavour involved developing a course, titled Professional Development and Lifelong Learning (PDLL), for learners enrolled in our pre-service teacher education (Bachelor of Education) program. Throughout this course-development process, we continued to ask ourselves, how can we convey to pre-service teachers that adult education and adult learning has relevance in a teacher education program? We then pondered other professional programs such as nursing, social work, business, and fine arts. The common ground that transcends silos that typically differentiate professional disciplines is that *we are all lifelong adult learners*, regardless of the career path we navigate.

As we explored the literature in support of the development of the PDLL course, we realized that much of the literature in adult education

was directed toward those enrolled in graduate programs and that this literature focused heavily on the study of adult education. What was missing was a book that spanned and spoke to individuals participating in undergraduate, vocational, or continuing education programs and to learning that we acquire beyond traditional formal education contexts. This book has been written in response to this niche in the literature.

Do we dare admit that, collectively, we draw from 50-plus years of experience in our work with adult learners, in multiple contexts, and from the many different roles that we have assumed? We would like to stress that “50-plus years” speaks to our combined experience; we both launched our careers at a very young age! On a serious note, we have been social worker, staff development consultant, vocational teacher, college instructor, team leader, corporate trainer, spiritual director, ESL teacher, adult basic education instructor, family life educator, small group facilitator, artist, musician, community volunteer, activist, professional development coordinator, course developer, instructional designer, and leadership trainer. All of these roles have contributed, significantly, to our present work as associate professors in educational studies in adult learning, in the Werklund School of Education at the University of Calgary. Looking back, each experience we have gathered along the way has contributed richly to the tapestry of our learning journeys.

# Acknowledgements

This book provides a glimpse of some learning challenges, opportunities for growth, and significant learning moments shared by adult learners we have been privileged to meet and experience along the way. We refer to adult learners who span many disciplines and work and learning contexts that include adult learners currently enrolled in formal, more traditional education programs; graduates who now work in a variety of workplaces; and educators, leaders, and workplace trainers who teach and facilitate adult learning. What is most significant, however, is that, beyond our diverse work and learning contexts, what connects us all—our common ground—is that if we remain open to the challenge, we all are and will continue to be lifelong adult learners.

In the pages that follow, some of these voices speak to us directly about navigating the formal, informal, and incidental terrain of adult learning and of some insights gained as courageous sojourners on an often unpredictable, non-linear, frequently messy and circuitous, lifelong learning pathway. There are many other voices, however, not directly referred to by name in the chapters that follow, who have significantly guided the evolution and writing of this text. All of these individuals continue to enrich our own learning journeys and practice. We remain humbled by and grateful to all who continue to share their stories with us. We receive this as an invitation to delve more deeply into making meaning of our own learning narratives and into the exploration of adult education as a rich, diverse, and often challenging field of scholarship and practice. To all we have met thus far—those who have directly shaped, formed, and influenced our own learning narratives—and to those we have yet to meet, we extend our deepest appreciation. Without you, this book would not have been possible.

We would like to thank our families, friends, colleagues, and our own Werklund School of Education at the University of Calgary, for encouragement and the space you provided so that we could bring this text to fruition. Needless to say, we often “burned the midnight oil” and this meant that other commitments and responsibilities were put on the back-burner. Our heartfelt appreciation also goes to Canadian Scholars’ Press for recognizing the need for and supporting the publication of this text. You were on board from the very beginning and your guidance, responsiveness, and wisdom provided us invaluable insight and guidance.





# On Being an Adult Learner



## Introduction

We have had the pleasure and privilege of journeying with and learning from hundreds of adult learners over the past many years—learners who span a multitude of diverse contexts and cultures. Some were enrolled in certificate, diploma, and degree programs offered through traditional post-secondary and continuing education environments. Others drew from professional contexts—nurses, social workers, sports coaches, faculty members from colleges and universities, human resource personnel, and family life educators. We have also worked and learned with individuals employed in business and industry and with those working for pay or volunteering in community-based, non-profit contexts, such as retreat centres, social service agencies, self-help programs, youth centres, and Aboriginal communities. Most recently, some of our work has focused on personal and professional development and adult learning for individuals enrolled in a Bachelor of Education pre-service teacher education program. Regardless of context, however, we are reminded that *we are all adult learners, navigating the circuitous pathway of life and learning.*

Our learning environments have always been rich in diversity, even when, at first glance, participants appeared to have much in common. For example, the teacher education program was a very large class of more than 350 pre-service teachers. One would assume the presence of common ground in that all were embarking on a career that focused on teaching children and youth within the K–12 system. As the designated instructors for this course, we brought our knowledge and experiences

that were deeply rooted in *adult* education and *adult* learning. We were not K–12 teachers. At the onset, it became clear that many who sat staring down at the podium where we were situated were puzzled and pondering, *Why is an adult education course a core course offering in my teacher preparation program? I am here to learn how to teach children, not adults.* Needless to say, we had our work cut out for us. As we gazed across the expansive science theatre during one of the large group lectures, we were mindful that, regardless of the commonality of career choice that united all those taking the course, there was little homogeneity represented here.

Over the months that followed, differences that were visible, and those less so, served as constant reminders that learning environments where adults gather to learn and to work are rich with opportunities and challenges. Diversity of age and life experience was particularly significant in that the pre-service teachers spanned 18 to 60 years of age. Who would have thought? There were gender differences, cultural differences, varied religious beliefs and traditions represented, and a diversity of sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity. Learning style preferences, interests, and abilities also became visible throughout the semester, as did differences in values, world views, perspectives, and beliefs. This richness of difference shaped our learning environment, our individual and collective learning experiences, and the dynamics in the class. We were once again reminded that *we are all adult learners* and that this was our common ground.

As we work our way through the many topics and themes presented throughout these chapters, we invite you to consider—regardless of profession, work context, age, gender, cultural beliefs, academic background, and all other life experiences that have contributed to who you are now and to where you are located in life—that the potential for learning is *lifelong* and that possibilities for learning greet us in the most unsuspecting and unexpected ways. To put it simply, some of the wisest and most educated people we have met along the way were individuals who lacked formal schooling or post-secondary education. Life was their teacher and they remained open to the power and possibility of making



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