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REFLECTIONS ON A RESEARCH EXPERIENCE AT AN INTERNATIONAL TREASURE: THE ALEXANDER N. CHARTERS LIBRARY OF RESOURCES FOR EDUCATORS OF ADULTS

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ABSTRACT: Since 1949, Syracuse University has assembled historical documents, including manuscript, print, visual, and media materials, related to adult education. Today, Syracuse University Library-The Alexander N. Charters Library of Resources for Educators of Adults serves as an international treasury for the Adult and Continuing Education Collections, housed in the Department of Special Collections. The collection is one of the world's largest compilations of English-language materials in this field, truly an international treasure. This paper is a reflection on my research experience in the spring of 2012. I have included general and historical information on the collection, useful web links including grant information and internship opportunities. This paper encompasses my research experience at the Alexander N. Charters Library of Resources for Educators of Adults, disclosing the purpose of my research trip, my findings, a few lessons I learned, recommendations and of course my overall reflections on the Alexander N. Charters Library of Resources for Educators of Adults.

Introduction

The Alexander N. Charters Library of Resources for adult education houses one of the largest internationally recognized collections of primary and secondary resources in various media, spanning the history of the professionalization of adult education. Since 1949, Syracuse University has assembled historical documents, including manuscript, print, visual, and media materials, related to adult education. Today, the Adult and Continuing Education Collections, housed in the Department of Special Collections, form one of the world's largest compilations of English-language materials in this field.

In the late 1960s, Syracuse University (SU) initiated Publications in Continuing Education, designed to gather adult education publications and make them available to the field. Many of these publications were contributed by adult education organizations, including the Adult Education Association of the U.S.A. Others, such as directories developed under contract with United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), were generated at Syracuse University. In all, there were about 400 publications. These are no longer actively distributed. The Syracuse University Library-The Alexander N. Charters Library of Resources for Educators of Adults (the Charters library) is an international treasure in the field of adult education representing a valuable resource to the field.

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Access to the collection is free and open to the public, adult education scholars, practitioners and graduate students from around the world to use the collection. The Syracuse University library website http://library.syr.edu/find/scrc/collections/subjects/adult-and-continuing-ed.php provides links to schedule visits and to request specific boxes from individual collections. The library does request approximately two weeks’ notice allowing staff to locate off-site materials and arrange for retrieval. On-site collection space is limited and with the continued growth of the overall collection this notice is essential for both research and library staff. Although this international treasure is free, the Charters library realizes that travel is necessary for most researchers in order to utilize this treasure, thus, the Charters library offers research grants. Grant information can be obtained at http://library.syr.edu/digital/guides/a/AlexanderNCharters/grants.htm. Other information on the Charters library can be found at http://scrc.syr.edu/charterslibrary.

There are 92 collections that fall entirely or partially under the heading of adult and continuing education. In the past three years, 48 of those collections have been utilized by 37 different researchers. I am one of the practitioner/doctoral students who utilized the collection to enhance my knowledge. This paper is a reflection of my research experience at the library. Included are my purposes for the research trip to The Alexander N. Charters Library of Resources for Educators of Adults at Syracuse University, NY; findings and a few lessons I learned along the way; overall reflections of my research experience including reflections on the personal interview with Alexander (Alex) Charters; and recommendations.

**Purpose for the Research Trip**

The purpose of my research trip to the Alexander N. Charters Library of Resources for Educators of Adults was twofold. One, I wanted to gather any data available on my dissertation subject, John A. Henschke (John), including interviews with Alex Charters. The Charters library houses the archived records for the Adult Education Association (AEA-USA)/American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE) from 1924 through 1994. John’s term as president of AAACE was not within the timeframe housed at the library; however, I hoped to find reference to him in the material.

Commission of Professors of Adult Education (CPAE) archived records are also available at the Charters library; the date range on that material is 1950 through 2002, with the bulk of the records dating between 1970-1985. John is a member of the AAACE, and the CPAE. In addition to these two prominent organizations, my dissertation subject is a member the International Society for Comparative Adult Education (ISCAE) also a distinguished organization of which the library houses archived records. ISCAE archives consist of a relatively small collection including records from the ISCAE, correspondence, minutes, agenda, and material relating to the book *Comparative Adult Education*, published 1998. Materials from this collection span 1991-2002.

These are a few of the organizations that provide the Charters library records for archival and as such public access on a regular base; however, most are approximately ten years
behind the current date. During my research visit, I had the opportunity to discuss this with one of the Charters library staff. For the purpose of this paper the staff members will be referred to by their first initial to protect privacy, “M” explained that in her experience organizations such as AAACE, ISCAE and CPAE typically stored their records for approximately ten years at the individual organizations location before donating them to the library. Once donated to the Charters library they are cataloged and boxed, the boxes are assigned numbers for easy retrieval.

Purpose One, Findings

While the records available from the various organizations did not provide the data I was originally interested in, I did gather interesting information regarding these organizations. As a doctoral student with a professional background in a discipline other than adult education, (mine is Nursing) I am always interested in the history of the discipline. The evolution of the Adult Education Association of the USA to that of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education was fascinating. Best of all was the fact that you could see this evolution through the eyes of the participants when you read their letters and reviewed the materials available in each box. The felt texture of events was in the personal correspondences and minutes of meetings, both available at the library.

Reviewing the materials in the CPAE boxes was very informative and honestly somewhat disappointing. Disappointing because of the guidelines for early CPAE membership; those guidelines stated that if you did not practice adult education as a full time faculty member you were not eligible for membership. As an adult educator with a background in nursing education, many in my field do not practice as full time faculty members, but as adjuncts while working full time in the hospital or other health care professional fields. By this standard, the majority of health care practitioners who contribute to the education of the next generation of practitioners did not qualify as adult educators. I also noticed a feeling of what I would term a gender gap. My perception was that females did not have the same roles and responsibilities or acceptance as their male colleagues. As a nurse and female, this was disappointing.

John, my dissertation subject, was a member of the ISCAE during the timeframe housed at the Charters library, unfortunately the collection did not generate data for my dissertation. This small collection is growing and I foresee that with the inclusion of the ISCAE as a pre-conference to the national AAACE and CPAE conferences the material available for future research will expand.

Previously, I stated that the AAACE, ISCAE and the CPAE collections did not provide data for my dissertation research. However, the Alexander Charters collection did offer correspondences that addressed my subject. Alex’s collection was one of the collections I requested in advance. At the time of my visit, Alex’s collection was not available to the public, but the staff was able to accommodate my request with some advanced additional information regarding particular data I was interested in viewing.

Alex’s collection included personal correspondences and material relevant to Syracuse University (SU). This material encompasses the history and evolution of not only the library, but the adult education program at Syracuse University. While reading this
material I was amazed and at times overwhelmed with the contributions to adult education either initiated at SU or saw dramatic growth as a result of SU’s sponsorship. For example, both the ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult Education and the Syracuse University Publications in Continuing Education, have made significant contributions to the field of adult education.

**Purpose Two**

In addition to gathering data for my doctoral dissertation, I wanted to acquire information on any published or unpublished articles of Malcolm S. Knowles the library had in the Knowles manuscript collection. One of the reasons for choosing my dissertation subject is my unprecedented access to John; this access is due to my position as his graduate assistant. When John and I talk about Malcolm, we refer to him as Malcolm, as does this paper. John is a previous student of Malcolm’s, who some consider the father of andragogy in the U.S. (Cooke, 1994). John’s deep abiding respect for and belief in the theory and philosophy of andragogy guide his research. His long association with Malcolm and his familiarity with Malcolm’s work contributed to a current research project, the updating of the *Making of an Adult Educator an Autobiographical Journey*. John has undertaken this project with two colleagues, who like John, are previous students of Malcolm.

Malcolm, like many other leaders and practitioners in the field of adult education, donated large quantities of materials to the library. One of my goals for the research trip to the library was to attempt to find material previously unpublished of Malcolm’s. As the unofficial historian of andragogy, John has accumulated a large collection of material published by Malcolm. However, this trip offered the possibility of uncovering material yet unpublished; thus, unavailable to the general public.

**Purpose Two, Findings**

While purpose “one” did not generate the desired data, purpose “two” surpassed my expectations! I admit I am an andragogue; I believe in and practice the theory of andragogy. Not surprising considering I completed a doctoral dissertation on John A. Henschke, and his congruency between theory and practice. John is an expert on andragogy and completing a dissertation espousing a theory you yourself do not believe would be difficult at best. Therefore, the opportunity to review Malcolm’s contributions to the Charters library was exciting to say the least.

I admit I reviewed the boxes containing material I hoped would generate data for my dissertation first, but it quickly became apparent that the desired data was not yet available at the library. Much of this was due to record dates. Malcolm, however, was a different story. I spent two days on Malcolm’s boxes. Like Alex, Malcolm had a large collection available at the library. Unlike Alex, Malcolm’s collection was not being reorganized at the time of my visit. Thus, I requested a large number of the 60+ boxes containing Malcolm’s works.

A personal letter written by Malcolm in April of 1970 was used as data in my dissertation. This letter, in Malcolm’s words, told of the practitioners whom he
considered influential in the development and evolution of his conception of andragogy. I found in one of the files within a box, hand written notes on what are now known as the six assumptions of the adult learner. Again, having great respect for history, that finding was unforgettable. When I realized what I was holding, well that feeling is indescribable. The Charters library offers the opportunity for researchers worldwide to see the evolution of theories and philosophies as they developed.

I found quite a few articles for John’s research project. Approximately 10 items never before published were found during my trip. A favorite of mine is an article on role playing. In this article, Malcolm described the value of role playing in education and provided an example of use within his family, illustrating that andragogical methods are useful in a variety of settings. Other previously unknown material to John of Malcolm’s surfaced during the research trip. This material included presentations and conference materials in adult education along with workshop materials for human resource development.

Reflections on my Research Experience

Before I went to the Charters library in April (2012) I was excited, I knew I was embarking on an experience open to all, yet underutilized. The standard comment I received when colleagues, professors, or doctoral students heard I was spending spring break researching at the library was “wow, I wish I could go”. I assure you, the trip was well worth my time and you can go!

Alex and Margaret Charters are personal friends of John; they graciously extended that friendship to me. On John’s recommendation alone, they invited me into their home for the extent of my research at the library. I arrived in Syracuse, NY on a Monday afternoon, through previous arrangements Margaret met me at the airport and drove me to SU. We spent time that afternoon touring the campus.

First, Margaret showed me the library, my office for the next week. At the library, we picked up a campus map and Margaret introduced me to staff in the special collections section of the library, namely the Charters library, then it was off to tour the campus. Of course, I wanted to see University College, the adult education program. Then historic buildings on campus, the other Schools or Colleges on campus and the hotel situated in the center of campus (perfect location and accommodations for future researchers). Margaret explained where the borders of the campus were located and which schools shared those borders. She was kind enough to point out the medical programs, both nursing and physician education and the associated hospital for both programs. As a nurse, I was interested in both programs. Finally, Margaret made sure I knew where to find food and caffeine on campus, Starbucks is a short three block walk. Then home to meet Alex.

Alex is an interesting dynamic individual who is willing to discuss theories and philosophies with you even when he does not agree with your view point. Alex has never differentiated between andragogy and pedagogy; he considers principles of both to be “just good education principles.” However, he indulged this doctoral student and engaged in discussion. Alex truly is interested in the growth and advancement of the
field of adult education. Even in retirement, he continues to contribute and participate in
the field.

One of my goals for the research trip was to interview Alex for my dissertation. I
conducted the formal interview on Wednesday evening. While I did have predetermined
interview questions, I wanted time to review material at the library in general and
Alex’s collection in particular, allowing for the possibility of additional questions
arising from that material. I will not discuss details of the interview due to the fact that
resulting data was used in my doctoral dissertation and consent to disclose was not
requested from Alex.

However, Alex and I did discuss the library and sharing that experience is part of this
paper. Alex related how the library originally grew out of his personal collection of
books, journals and other material he made available to faculty in the adult education
programs. Over time, the collection grew, with support from the Kellogg Foundation, the
Fund for Adult Education, the U.S. government, and SU, and the collection continues to
grow. Both Dr. Alex and Dr. Margaret Charters continue working to promote lifelong
learning. The house is filled with evidence to support this claim, from books ranging from
literacy to compressive writing material to news articles regarding educational topics.
There is even a thank you card from the Obamas for their efforts in the field of education
on the family note board in the kitchen. I was certainly in good company.

I spent my days at the library. The library opens at 9 a.m. every weekday and stays open
until 5 pm. on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday and until 7 p.m. on Tuesday and
Thursday. The special collections section is located on the 6th floor. The staff arranges all
requested material at the front of the room located close to the staff desk. Material is
identifiable by researcher’s name. When you arrive at the library, you are instructed to
sign in and assigned a locker outside the collections area, for personal items such as
coats, umbrellas and handbags. Laptops and other small computers are allowed in the
collection area. Silent mode is requested for all cellular devices. The library supplied
scratch paper and pencils. Additional materials are not provided by the library.

I was at the library when it opened at 9 a.m. each morning. I provided the library staff
with a list of requested boxes before my arrival. When I visited Monday afternoon the
staff inquired if I had a particular order I wished to review the material, I informed them
that I would like to start with the AAACE, CPAE and ISCAE collections and then
Alex’s collection, wrapping up with Malcolm’s collection.

The first full day, Tuesday, I was able to review the three organization collections I
requested. I did not request material from dates that John was not involved with the
organizations. This helped with the time limitation imposed by not spending more than a
week at the library. I was able to start on Alex’s collection late Tuesday. This meant I
was able to inquire of Alex regarding some of the data I uncovered. Alex’s collection
provided details of his role and that of University College in the advancement of adult
education programs. I remember how interested I was in the study abroad programs
initiated at SU and Alex’s involvement with the program. University College sponsored
many programs that benefited the non-traditional or adult student; however, it also
sponsored programs that benefited the traditional college student, thus, advancing the
field in general. Alex’s various leadership roles over the years placed him in the center of many of these advancements.

When I returned to Alex and Margaret’s I had the pleasure of visiting with a friend of the Charters family also staying with Alex and Margaret while she was in town. The evening was spent discussing my dissertation, mutual interests and the day’s findings. Alex and Margaret were always interested in what I had discovered that day, what I found interesting.

On Wednesday, the second research day, I was at the library at opening. I spent the day finishing Alex’s collection and starting on Knowles’s collection. While researching the AAACE files I found a few interesting letters/notes regarding Malcolm that peaked my curiosity prompting a request for additional boxes from the specific timeframes. The staff was retrieving the additional material today; it would be available in the afternoon. Reading Malcolm’s collection offered insight into the *whys* of a theory I practice, therefore, was very informing.

Because the library was open until 5 p.m., this was a short research day. I conducted the formal interview with Alex for my doctoral dissertation on Wednesday evening. Alex thoughtfully answered my questions elaborating where necessary and even provided examples. His willingness to participate and openness in his responses was another example of his dedication to the field of adult education.

My final full day of research started with an early arrival at the library. On our way to the library, Alex disclosed his feelings on a question discussed the previous evening during the interview. Alex had obviously reflected on the interview after its completion. Alex’s insight was contradictory to that of another participant, interestingly the specific question both participants had a view on was not a direct question. This however, prompted me to add the question to other interviewee’s preselected questions and to John’s preselected questions. This is another demonstration of Alex’s continued contribution to the field, I do not know if I would have followed this line of questioning if Alex had not brought it up; however, the results of the question are important and available in my dissertation research; *Exploring congruency between John A. Henschke’s practice and scholarship* (Risley, 2012). I will be happy to provide a copy of the study to those interested.

My day started out with insight and that theme was carried out at the library. Thursday was spent completing the review of Malcolm’s collection. I spent the day taking photos with my iPad. While touching some of the manuscripts is prohibited and are in protective covers, with cradles provided to reduce stress on the binding when reading, other such as personal notes and paper are allowed to be handled with care. Photos taken without flash are permitted at the library. Thursday was the day I collected the majority of the data for John’s project. By the time I was back at Alex and Margaret’s I was exhausted but still curious. My time was almost up; I was leaving for home on Friday. Alex must have anticipated this feeling, because he had gathered materials from his private collection for me to review. Each evening Alex inquired about what I found that day and what I was still curious about, from my responses, he diagnosed my learning needs accurately when he determined that the contributions of the library, SU’s University College, and Alex himself piqued my interest.
To satisfy my addition interest, Alex provided me with manuscripts from his private collection. These included his autobiography and a history of the University College and its many contributions. While some of the information I had viewed in his collection at the library, these manuscripts offered more detail. I am very happy I had the opportunity to view these since the complete collection was not open to the public during my visit.

Lessons Learned

The most important lesson I learned was that I needed more time. The staff at the library commented that they could not remember anyone else ever requesting to view so much material and that they did not know how I was able to go through so much. I explained that any item I wanted to study in depth I photo copied via the iPad, allowing me to save time and truly study the work at a later time. I used the same guidelines for what I considered borderline items. I would take a photo of anything I felt would be of use or interest in the future and moved on. I subscribe to the theory of “you can never have too much information.” Therefore, while I was able to gather substantial data aligning with my research trip purpose, I did not have time to investigate the many additional items that caught my attention. My next visit will involve more time and perhaps a more flexible research agenda, studying the field’s history is interesting in and of itself. I would like more time to just follow where the data lead, in this case the personal correspondences of members of the adult education community.

The other important lesson I learned was to save every version of my work. I do not allege that I will ever contribute to the field to the degree of Alex, Malcolm, or others who really made advances in establishing the field as a legitimate field of practice. However, I doubt that any of the individuals who have contributed to the growth of the field or the advancement of any discipline, theory, or philosophy truly set out with that goal in mind.

While each practitioner and scholar is striving to enrich the lives of those they serve, it is impossible to discern what will be considered invaluable or even interesting to the next generation of practitioners and scholars. For example, who would have imagined that handwritten notes, fading with age, written in pencil, describing what’s and why’s without the edits and niceties of publications would be of interest. I am sure that anyone who typed on the thin carbon copy paper never dreamed that 50+ years into the future a graduate student would find the process interesting. These details of our fields past are all but forgotten in an age where technology changes every few years and the final version is typically the only version saved on the computer hard drive. However, these details and many others are alive at the Charters library.

Recommendations
My only recommendation for the Charters library is please; include on the donation of materials documents a request, allowing the Charters library to display collection materials on-line. The hands-on visit was wonderful and I will certainly go back; however, not every researcher has the opportunity to travel to Syracuse. Providing the collection for on-line viewing would grant access to the treasure trove of knowledge available through the Charters library.

Adult educators, your knowledge and experience are valuable resources for our fields’ future. Sharing that knowledge via donations to the Charters library benefits us all. Please remember future donators, to grant the library permission to display your collection on-line.

Any library or adult education student requiring an internship or practicum experience this is the place to learn and grow. “M” from the Charters library shared with me that the library would happily provide an internship experience; unfortunately, it would be unpaid, like so many other internship experiences.

My experience at the library was priceless! I highly recommend every adult educator and adult education student visit the Charters library. You will not be disappointed. Take advantage of the grants if necessary, but by all means, avail yourself of the experience.

Conclusion

Syracuse University Library-The Alexander N. Charters Library of Resources for Educators of Adults is an international treasure. The knowledge and experiences portrayed throughout the materials in the collections is unsurpassed. Drs. Alex and Margaret Charters are inspirations to the field of education. Alex’s lifelong passion for adult education is demonstrated in his tireless dedication to the field. Alex is a founding father of the adult education field, the Charters library is only one of his many contributions; however, it is a priceless contribution.

I have great respect for individuals who blaze trails for others to follow, who contribute to the knowledge base without realizing where that will lead. Alex, Malcolm and many others provided a beacon for future researchers and practitioner to follow by their donations to the library. Understanding our history, promotes our future. The adult education field is relatively young, it is certainly growing, and the contribution made by members of the field who generously donated to the library enhances that growth.

This paper is a reflection of my research experience at the Charters library. The lessons I learned, and the knowledge I gained as a result of my research trip will continue to shape my practice as an adult educator. I encourage all of you to experience the Charters library for yourself. With 92 collections I am sure there is one that reflects your interest.

References
