
Working the Margins of Community-Based Adult Learning: The Power of Arts-Making in Finding Voice and Creating Conditions for Seeing/Listening by S. Butterwick and C. Roy (Eds.). Rotterdam, Netherlands: Sense Publishing, 2016.

Working the Margins of Community-Based Adult Learning is a well-rounded example of how art and creative forms of expression can influence, aid, and elevate transformative learning in community-based adult education. Specifically, the authors Shauna Butterwick and Carole Roy use an edited book format in a cohesive way to “gather stories from the margins and explore how various art and creative forms of expression can enable the voices of underrepresented individuals and communities to take shape and form” (p. ix). By inviting 18 contributors to share their varying perspectives on creative expression in community-based adult learning, this book introduces new ways of learning and practising artistic expression to the reader, regardless of research focus, profession or experience.

Butterwick and Roy have extensive theoretical and experiential knowledge within the field of community-based adult learning. Butterwick brings over 25 years of adult education experience and academic research in community-based, participatory, and arts-based approaches to adult education. Butterwick recently retired from the Department of Educational Studies at the University of British Columbia and is a research associate of the Canadian Centre for Policy Studies. Similarly, Roy has extensive experience in adult education, working internationally in community-based adult education. Roy’s research and experience are squarely rooted in arts-based approaches to community learning and social justice. Currently an Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Education at St. Francis Xavier University, Roy brings extensive knowledge and insight into the intersection of art, adult education, community-based learning, and social justice.

Butterwick and Roy effectively bring together a book with diverse chapters, creative expression, and different marginalized communities in varying geographic locations. To aid in the synthesis of the material, the book is divided into three major sections, one for each of the major themes addressed throughout the book: Storytelling through the visual arts (Chapters 1–4), increasing understanding between communities using creative expression (Chapters 5–9), and creative forms of expression that enact and embody social justice issues (Chapters 10–14). Although the different chapters and sections of the book vary considerably, consistent themes and insights are offered by a host of experienced adult educators.

What I find particularly delightful about this book is the ability to be exposed to different perspectives, not simply with the authors who contributed a chapter, but for the participants within the chapters themselves. It is an unfortunate reality that some voices/communities/ways of knowing are marginalized within our society, and yet through art and the process of creative forms of expression, marginalized voices are heard and acknowledged within the chapters of this book. Utilizing artistic forms of expression including zines, murals, political fashion shows, photovoice, film festivals, dance, and puppet shows, the editors and contributors of this book allow the “stories from the margins” (p. ix) to unfold in powerful, relatable, and transformational ways.

In poring over the pages, it is clear that this book is intended for adult educators interested in community-based approaches. That being said, the chapters in this book are so diverse that many individuals in other areas could benefit from the work, including community-based workers, social justice advocates, individuals working in the non-profit sector, those working with marginalized or underrepresented individuals and communities, and people who are interested in creative forms of expression. Ultimately, the book demonstrates “how the arts can make a difference, particularly in marginalized communities” (p. 181). In that context, those who are interested in the themes the book addresses—including self-awareness, collaboration, collective action, embodiment, and transformation—would find something in the chapters that is relevant to them.

Working the Margins of Community-Based Adult Learning is of clear benefit to readers. As a reader, my experience could have been enhanced with a concise but thorough summary of each chapter by the editors. There are chapters that are clearly summarized by the authors, and others that were vaguer. Providing a reader with a summary from the editors would have been beneficial to support me in picking out theoretical concepts, identifying transferable knowledge, and providing context regarding the relevance of the chapter to the overarching sections and themes of the book. The concluding section of the book, likening the chapters and themes to the strands of a braid, is incredibly effective, and I would have appreciated similar synthesis throughout the book.

Regardless of readers’ personal interests, there is an advantage to reading every chapter. The take away from this book is that utilizing art and creative expression as a conduit to express marginalized voices and perspectives shouldn’t be a ‘one size fits all’ approach, and therefore requires some bravery in the attempt by all involved. Challenges faced within many projects were significant and often unexpected due to their unconventional nature. A perspective shared by many of the contributors and poignantly expressed by Brian Nichols is: “I give myself permission to try new things...It is often through jumping into something that I learn how to do it in a matter that is more suited to the unique situation” (p. 46). Undoubtedly, this is a fundamental book for anyone interested in adult education, because it teaches us new ways of being, learning, and doing from a vast array of voices and perspectives.

Cortney Baldwin
Master’s student, Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies
University of Victoria
Email: CortneyBaldwin@uvic.ca