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Review of Adult Education as Theory, Practice and Research: the Captive Triangle

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**BOOK REVIEW for Level3 2012**

Title: Adult education as theory, practice and research: the captive triangle

Author: Robin Usher and Ian Bryant

Publisher: Routledge

Year: 2011

ISBN: 9780415684392 (hbk)

Key words: adult education, theory, action research, practical knowledge, reflection

This is a reprint of a volume first published in 1989, its typeface redolent of work bashed out on a 1980s electric typewriter. So, what does it have to offer the readers of today?

Usher and Bryant set out to challenge the dominance of theory and theoretical research over the practical knowledge of teachers in adult education and suggest ways in which academics and researchers such as themselves could shape the curriculum of students of adult education by rebalancing the 'captive triangle' of theory, practice and research. In fact, they assert, there is no actual theory of adult education, or of education per se. Taking a critical approach to traditional theories, in particular the natural science paradigm, but also the interpretive paradigm, they show how these fail to position theory in a historical and social context and that this affects how education and educational research are conceptualized. They are highly critical of the 'foundational disciplines' of psychology and sociology, which have been put forward by academics as the basis for an understanding of how education works.

In their view, it is the role of adult education to transcend power and ideology, to act in the world and to transform it. They propose hermeneutics, which is situated in the real world and involves understanding and interpretation, as the theoretical framework for reflective research by educational practitioners and, although critical of action research as currently practised, they suggest a series of steps to form a theory of action research (pp. 144-5) to bridge the gap between the theory and practice of adult education.

While seeking to give practical knowledge parity with formal theory and emphasising the importance of reflection-in-action (Schön 1983) as a way of developing informal theory, they also point to the possibility that practice can become distorted, can fail to do what it intends to do, and propose that there is a role for formal theory in solving this dilemma. In other words, Usher and Bryant close the hermeneutic circle of their argument by bringing theory and practice into alignment and by



advocating reflective research approaches to solve problems in the practice of adult education that are potentially as relevant today as when this book was first published more than two decades ago.

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