

Bagnall, Richard G 1999, *Discovering radical contingency: Building a postmodern agenda in adult education*, Peter Lang, New York (US), \$29.95.

Reviewer: Clive Kanes, Griffith University

With adult education as the primary focus, Richard Bagnall's new book seeks to explore the implications of postmodernity for adult education practice, research and the development of adult educators. The book is cast as a search for meaning in our new age of high velocity change, fragmentation and uncertainty-an age in which all meanings, including meaning itself, are questionable. At one level, it can be read as providing various new mappings of adult education addressed to an age that is increasingly sceptical about maps. On another level, it can be read as a hopeful defence of the plural forms of adult education; especially as these stand against the unities and certainties featured in alternative times and periods of certainty. On a third level, the book reads as a very personal document, one in which an ongoing quest for meaning in an area of significant personal concern to author is registered. These layerings lend great richness and complexity to the work; one senses an interplay among diverse and sometimes conflicting influences, such as liberal-humanism, the end of progress, the pluralisation of knowledge, the marketisation of human goals, experiences and aspirations.

The book is divided into three parts, each consisting of a number of chapters. Part One presents a view of modernism and modernist forms of adult education in particular. Writing includes a very succinct and useful survey of the main themes, concerning modernist culture and education. Adult education, it is argued, is shaped as marginal to mainstream education concepts and fields of practice.

Table: Bagnall's schema for six tensions within postmodern sociality

		Tensional quality	Modernist pole	Postmodernist pole
Domain	Belief	Situatedness	Transcendent	Particularised
		Ambiguity	Singular	Plural
	Individual identity	Determination	Holistic	Fragmented
		Control	Autonomous	Embedded
	Sociality	Homogeneity	Differentiated	Dedifferentiated
		Temporality	Developmentalist	Presentist

Part Two discusses postmodernism using the work of Chapter One as a background. It consists of a treatment of themes relating to postmodernist culture. Presentation is built around the construction and discussion of each of three concepts-belief, identity and sociality. Each is identified with pairs of 'tensional qualities', as follows. Belief is associated with tensions within the qualities of situatedness and ambiguity; individual identity within determination and control; and sociality within homogeneity and temporality. For Bagnall, postmodernist culture has a great deal to do with

struggles played out within each of these tensions. For instance, in relation to the situatedness of belief, it is lived out in the struggle (within and among issues) between the transcendence of belief on the one hand, and the particularisation of belief on the other. A full set of these tensional polarities is set out in the table (p.84) above.

Importantly, for Bagnall, modernism/postmodernist culture does not entail the unproblematic adoption of one pole of a tensional quality over another-rather, it involves the struggle (tension) among alternative lines of inclination, neither of which can be satisfied simultaneously. He writes that 'to be a part of the postmodernist condition is to be aware of the tensions and to live them' (p.81)-postmodernism is not to arrive at a settled view in relation to the alternatives suggested in Bagnall's tensional schema, it is to live somewhere between the poles indicated and to move between these' extremes from context to context, issue to issue. (Indeed, the themes of restlessness and tentativeness are critical to understanding Bagnall's work and the methods he adopts.)

As is clearly shown in Part Three of the book, Bagnall's construction of the tensional schema is purpose-built to allow him to articulate and trace choices and tensions within adult education in particular. This analysis is the task of chapters Six and Seven of Part Three in particular. In this exploration, discussion is rich in range and detail and makes extensive use of dialogues between the author and various students and practitioners of adult education, and various case studies relating to adult education practice. These chapters offer a thrilling read. Not only do they instantiate the elements of the previously developed tensional schema (and in so doing clarify important aspects of contemporary adult education practices), but they broaden the scope of the work beyond what is found in programmatic explorations of contemporary adult education themes.

Chapter Eight offers an alternative view of postmodern adult education. Eight qualities are determined-not, however, as the author warns as necessary features of the postmodernist view but as contingent realities and understandings produced by the author as an adult education practitioner and scholar. These qualities and a short description of each are as follows: heterodoxy (tendency of adult education to intentionally embrace alternative educational forms and practices); expressiveness

(tendency to down play the value of cognitive over affective interests and the diminution of propositional knowledge; increased regard for aesthetic and personal existential knowledge); reflexive contextualisation (whereby the teaching goals, procedures and curriculum both shape and are shaped by cultural context); revisionism (whereby educational knowledge is opened to radical reshaping-revision, reconstruction, deconstruction-depending on perspectives adopted or implied by context-driven cultural realities); indeterminacy (whereby the warrant given to legitimate

educational decisions is decentred, dispersed to a shifting set of cultural traditions and value positions); privatisation

(whereby individuals, rather than traditional educational frameworks, are active in making education choices; determination and control of educational engagement is devolved to the learner);

phenomenalism

(whereby educational engagement itself is valued, rather than merely its attainments and outcomes, such as are valued in outcomes-based education and competency based training); dedifferentiation

(whereby adult education is immersed in activities and settings which are not traditionally thought of as educational settings, for example the workplace, and the use of adult education concepts to articulate and operationalise activities within these settings). While it is not possible to do justice to the range of Bagnall's discussion in relation to these concepts (for example, his understanding of the deprofessionalisation of adult education are well worth reading), a consistent theme in his

discussion is the shift from imposed, enforced, monothematic understandings towards culturally diverse, contested, and multivalent practices. Authorising discourses are seen as connected with belief and action in adult education but not connected systematically and not permanently. They are

contingently related to belief and practice and this relationship is defined from time to time by: given and alternative cultural perspectives; localised needs; utilitarian and technical requirements;

and aesthetic and other affective and experiential needs and desires.

In Chapter Nine important currents ('nodal forms') building on those of Chapter Eight are identified as responses to postmodernity: contractualism (the contemporary tendency of adult education to work with learners or policy-makers or managers, in order to negotiate a set of learning solutions to educational problems), and open marketeering

(the public marketing of adult education programs in response to the perceived educational interests of the community and the moulding of those interests). For Bagnall, these responses to postmodernism illustrate oppositional tendencies within postmodernism which are articulated in the context of the understanding generated by the analytic framework afforded in Chapter Eight. For

instance, he illustrates how contractualism, with its tendencies to produce orthodox educational commodities (which, among other tendencies, disregard the affective interests of learners) can be conceptualised as a conservative response to the contingent values of postmodernity. Open

marketeeing, in contrast, for Bagnall, may sit more comfortably with the plural commitments and preferences of postmodern society; however these are easily sidelined by forces that facilitate the

manipulation of both the supply and demand sides of market transactions. Open marketeeing also

introduces substantial asymmetries, whereby consumption of educational goods is constrained by the ability of the consumer to command exchange values.

Within the context of postmodern realities discussed in the book, implications for research in adult education are teased out (Chapter Ten) and speculation is undertaken on the professional qualities of adult educators working within a postmodern cultural context (Chapter Eleven). In examining influences on research, the project-based purposes of research, the tendency to interpretivist methods and the embracing of discursive coherence, rather than correspondence with facts, as a warrant for legitimate research outcomes, are identified. This discussion will be illuminating to both research students and experienced researchers, expanding their understanding of educational research. In relation to the professional qualities of adult educators, Bagnall synthesises his discussion under the rubric of the 'situationally sensitive wayfarer'. By this he argues the position of adult educators is like that of 'roving diplomats of the human condition', that is, like persons 'who draw upon their knowledge of the human condition to negotiate their way through it in the cause of their vocation' (p.182). In arguing this case he identifies a set of qualities characteristic of adult educators in the postmodern scene. These are: reflexive awareness (relating one's practice to one's own cultural investments and developing an attitude of humility towards one's beliefs and a reluctance to make them a precondition for others); individual and organisational responsibility (in which relationships among concepts of professional standing, authority and respect as a professional are linked to the responsibility to maintain individual and organisational allegiance discourses, informing their identities and actions); respect for persons and their realities involving tolerance and respect for difference (the acceptance and valuing of difference among commitments and realities represented in the social order) and sympathetic understanding of and responsiveness to lived events

(not merely a recognition of difference, but and identification with it); negotiation of discriminative realities and alleviation of discriminative. injustice (abilities to negotiate agreements, understandings and pathways subject to the constraining facts and countervailing discourses of professional practice).

The book concludes with a postscript, prompting the reader to again consider the concepts of contingency, which define and limit the scope of the work. The work functions around allocating value to contingent rather than necessary relations relevant to progress in adult education. In this, the author consistently emphasises the place of socially framed knowledge in contrast to knowledge which draws on and contributes to an understanding of universal themes-the emphasis is on practical and descriptive ethics of adult education, rather than on deciphering universal inscriptions

and frameworks for what adult education is and ought to be. Thus contingency becomes radical at least in two ways. First, the content of speculations emphasise an epistemological tentativeness and restlessness with respect to the issues and realities of adult education. Second, the methods of analysis adopted by the author, the listing and relisting of multifaceted tendencies, tensions, nodal points, themes, characteristic qualities and so forth, suggest in themselves a sense of contingency at the root of the scholarly engagement with the contemporary themes of adult education and its realisation in the forms of analysis and synthesis.

Finally, the author states his intention is not to present a framework for adult education policy so much as to stimulate the production of different ideas about the relationship between postmodern culture and adult education. Bagnall achieves this goal in an exemplary fashion. The book is immense in scope, but rich in detail; diverse in the range of theoretical and practical concepts it considers, but specific in its treatment of cultural questions relating to adult education. The book illustrates high levels of scholarship; offers a wide range of new and important ideas for further consideration and thought; illustrates its views and understanding with carefully chosen vignettes and interview materials, which link and resonate with other more discursive passages. The book represents a considerable achievement of analytic method, but finds and engages powerful synthetic qualities surrounding the important and enduring concept of contingency. While many might disagree with Bagnall's views of adult education, the book provides a platform to engage in dispute and context on vital questions. As such it should find a welcome place among the reference materials of researchers (both established and emerging) and as a thought provoking stimulus to evolving policy and practice within adult education.