



Conflicting Paradigms in Adult Literacy Education: In Quest of a U.S. Democratic Politics of Literacy

George Demetrian

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The book provides a historical overview of adult literacy theory, policy, practice, and research from the mid-1980s to the present. The main focus is a descriptive analysis of three distinctive schools of literacy: the Freirean-based participatory literacy movement grounded in oppositional politics and grass-roots community activism; the British-based New Literacy Studies that focuses on the ways in which diverse students utilize various literacy practices in their daily lives; and the U.S. federal government's focus on functional literacy linked to a 45-year policy emphasis on workforce readiness. These three schools of thought lead to substantially different implications over such critical areas as curriculum, assessment and accountability, and the socio-cultural role of literacy, policy, and political culture, which are discussed throughout the chapters of the book. This discussion includes a chapter on research traditions that closely parallels these perspectives on literacy education.

Demetrian argues that unless values grounded ultimately in political culture emerge, it is exceedingly unlikely that the adult literacy field will be able to move from its current marginalized status toward that of achieving the level of public and policy legitimacy many believe it needs for its long-term institutional flourishing. It is argued that any settlement of this issue must be accomplished in the field of practice rather than the ground of theory, even as theoretical insight can help to frame the issues.

Conflicting Paradigms in Adult Literacy Education: In Quest of a U.S. Democratic Politics of Literacy speaks to a wide audience, including not only the adult literacy community, but anyone interested in educational theory, practice, policy, research traditions, or political culture, and more fundamentally, in their intersection. Given the breadth of the topics covered, as well as the broad scope of the argument, the book is also meant for those who would like to gain a useful perspective on contemporary U.S. culture, through the window of these conflicting tensions within the field of adult literacy education.

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