

# ADULT LEARNING

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# Jessie Allen Charters

A Voice for Our Times

Lee Karlovic

**W**here are the women role models in adult education? When I as a graduate student of adult education asked this question I was repeatedly referred to the same one or two names. It wasn't until I was able to work directly with adult education historical documents myself in the 1990s that I discovered information about the kind of woman—energetic, visionary—that I was looking for. And this woman wasn't one of the women whose names I'd heard.

Jessie Blount Allen Charters (1880–1971) was called by one newswriter of the day a “pioneer worker in adult education” and “literally one of the founders of the movement” (Ryerson Mart 1933). She led the development of parenting skills in the U.S. and was said to influence its development in Scotland, Burma, India, and China. Said to be “the first woman on the Pacific Coast to receive a Ph.D. degree,” she chose a specialty in psychology, was a student of John Dewey, and graduated with distinction at the age of twenty-three.

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## University-Sponsored Adult Education Pioneer

While attending a conference, in 1928, Charters received the following Western Union telegram from George F. Arps, dean of the Ohio State University (OSU) College of Education. This moved her into a pivotal leadership role in adult education: *Trustees definitely established department of adult education with you as its head stop courses were also authorized.*

The forty-eight-year-old Charters—a mother of four and the wife of an academic for over twenty years—could now formally continue and escalate the considerable leadership she had been showing over the years as a volunteer, community member, and citizen. Of the years devoted to raising her children, she said, “My real work has been my family. . . . It was hard to concentrate on technical stuff when I was tired, and harder still to force myself to write, but that was the way I kept in touch with what was being done in psychology, until my children were a little more grown up” (Ryerson Mart).

She was the author of thirty-three articles and pamphlets about issues such as the training of leaders for adult study groups, the responsibility of the state for education of parents, and the need for religious development.

As chair of the department, she created and taught graduate level credit courses such as Theory and Problems of Adult Education and Leadership Training. She was also a key player in the development of the Ohio Association of Adult Education.

Only five years later, Charters's professional life was cut short when she received notice of her dismissal. According to biographical notes of her daughter, Margaret Charters Lyon, “In the depth of the depression, when many professional people were out of work, there was a clamor at OSU against both husband and wife working. Since JAC (Jessie) and WWC (Werrett Wallace) had higher combined salaries above any other couple, she was one of the first to be sacrificed; her adult education job was given to a man.”

All references for this article are located in the *Jessie and W.W. Charters Papers*, Syracuse University, George Arnt Research Library for Special Collections, New York. The research required to produce this article was made possible by the author's participation at the 1991 Syracuse University Kellogg Foundation Adult Education Project's History Working Scholar Conference and conversations with Dr. Alexander Charters, Jessie Charters's nephew.

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What further contributions would Charters have made had she been allowed to continue in an organizationally sponsored role? As Edgar Dale, her husband's former student, wrote in a 1980 letter to her daughter "... I think she (Jessie) gets inadequate attention. She had a career of her own and a mind of her own."

#### **The Need for Parenting Skills**

Charters focused on what she thought was a most important and overlooked adult skill. She said "... Learning how to be a parent is the greatest of all courses of study" (Charters 1928).

From 1928-1933, Charters coordinated and implemented a massive parental education effort—newsletter, radio programs, lectures—throughout the state of Ohio. She developed continuing education study groups on parental education for interested OSU alumnae as well as study groups for parents of children and adolescents who were in trouble with the law.

Charters also developed a general study course for parents, parent study groups, and training institutes. She emphasized how

mothers could improve their children's lives. In an undated news article, Charters said she wished to dissipate "the belief of hundreds that it is necessary to be especially trained in this work, to have a wide knowledge of child psychology, or be able to answer all questions which mothers might ask." She was involved in the formation of the National Council of Parent Education at an organizing meeting in New York City in 1928 and was served on several national governmental commissions.

#### **Acting Against Classism and Pulling Rank**

In an undated course syllabus outline, Charters wrote "... Choose friends from amongst people of our own kind, i.e., occupation, neighborhood, social level, age, sex. But also try to make friends from many other groups of people. Do not be afraid to have a friend from a much lower social level if you can look up to her, as we often should do to our servants and so-called "inferiors." Go half way in making friends, and do not be disheartened at a first seeming failure. Be sure you are tactful, and that your motive is wholly honest, not self-seeking in a sordid way."

In what was probably a rank-conscious group where senior and junior faculty never connected, much less socialized, Jessie, "... more than a professor's wife," and her husband, in 1933, hosted a party to which "even wives of part-time instructors were invited and even welcomed" (The Dowager 1932).

#### **Learning as a Lifelong Endeavor**

Charters's commitment to lifelong learning is shown in her correspondence with a woman who initially enrolled in a correspondence study course. Charters repeatedly asked the woman why she wasn't completing the lessons. When the woman wrote of her family and economic difficulties, as well as discouragement due to the lack of library resources, Charters showed a practical, nurturing side. Despite a rule that new lessons were to be sent only after preceding ones were completed, Charters sent copies of all the lessons saying "... the object of this course is to do the most good to those who need it, and perhaps you will have time to read the lessons over if you do not have time to return recitations." The letters that continued over a twenty-year span reveal a warmth and

*See Charters, p. 26*

personal relationship that is far more complex than that of two people processing a mechanistic correspondence course.

### **Making the Connections**

Despite what her daughter called her mother's subsequent loss of spirit "from losing her professional opportunities," Charters apparently continued to make connections between and among fields and ideas until her death in 1971. For example, she referred to the economic reasons underlying problems in the home, schools, and society. From 1944–1951, she chaired the American Friends' Service Committee race relations program. In a 1953 letter, she wrote "That led me into many problems concerned with mental health. Penology and mental health can hardly be separated."

The complexity of Jessie Allen Charters's contribution to the field of adult education can only be highlighted in this brief glimpse of her work. I think that access to accurate, accessible information about women like Charters could make a big difference to practitioners and students of the field. We could, for example, learn from Charters the need to develop allies from related fields such as social work, human services, and criminology. We might refocus on parenting skills, thus serving as a bridge with the burgeoning early childhood education movement. And perhaps, most urgently, for those who need a sign that adult education can make a difference we can integrate vital, productive voices from our past into our own

work. As Charters said "Adult education . . . has a functional relation to daily living. . . . The test of real education—the only test most adults understand and desire—is to change life, to improve ways of behaving. Certificates, marks and credit hours are mere frills. Education that can be used is the real end of study. . . . Will there ever come a time when there will be few school houses, but tens of thousands of community centers?" (Charters 1929). ▲