

Paul Belanger. In memoriam

No man is an island,
entire of itself;
every man is a piece of the continent,
a part of the main.
If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less,
as well as if a promontory were,
as well as if a manor of thy friend's
or of thine own were:
any man's death diminishes me,
because I am involved in mankind,
and therefore never send to know
for whom the bell tolls;
it tolls for thee.

(John Donne)

One of my best memories of Paul happened in Denmark following the triumph of the Hamburg CONFINTEA UNESCO Conference on Adult Education in 1997. A group of us had travelled to Elsinore, site of the first world conference on adult education in 1948, to share reflections on what had just taken place in Hamburg. A group of us were standing on ridge overlooking a beach leading to the Baltic Sea. Paul, in a great burst of energy began to run towards the water, stripping off his clothes. "We are Canadians who are not afraid of the cold water", he said as he dove into the sea. It was a moment of exultation that all of us who had been involved in the planning of the Hamburg events had felt. It was Paul who embodied the joy on all our behalf with his plunge into the sea.

I met Paul in the mid-1970s when I was planning the first ICAE World Assembly of Adult Education in Tanzania. Paul was the Secretary-General of the ICEA, the Institut de coopération pour l'éducation des adultes. We had invited the ICEA to become a member of the newly formed International Council for Adult Education. Paul began his years of activism as part of the student-worker movement in Quebec. He worked as an animator for a progressive cine-club that brought thoughtful films for discussions about politics, culture and the future. He did a PhD looking at the work of animation rural in Senegal before becoming the Secretary General of the ICEA. The ICEA became a powerhouse of research, policy development and advocacy for the adult education movement in Quebec. The ICEA was and remains a model of bringing together the social movements of adult education together with the professional adult education bodies to form a remarkable space to promote not only learning itself, but the lives of learners.

Paul played a critically important role in the International Council for Adult Education during my time as Secretary-General. He and his team from Quebec were the main authors of the UNESCO Declaration, the Right to Learn. The Right to Learn was adopted by the 4th UNESCO Conference on Adult Education in Paris in March of 1985. From 1989-1999 Paul served as the Director of the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning in Hamburg, Germany. His best-known achievement during that period was the hosting of the Fifth UNESCO International Conference on Adult Education. CONFINTEA in Hamburg brought 1500 people from 190 countries to Hamburg to produce The Agenda for the Future and the Hamburg Declaration.

Following his time with the UNESCO Institute, Paul was a highly productive scholar at UQAM, the Université de Québec à Montréal. Paul was recognized with Honorary Doctorates from St. Francis Xavier University in Canada and the University of Surrey in England.

Daniel Baril, Chair of the Board of the UNESCO Institute in Hamburg and Secretary-General of ICEA says, "I have lost my mentor, the person who taught me all about what is essential in Adult Learning and Education, about ICEA, ICAE and about the Hamburg Institute"

Prof Leona English, celebrates, "His long and distinguished career in adult education."

Paul Belanger was born March 19, 1939, and passed away in January 31, 2025 May he rest in Peace.

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