

LIVING ADULT EDUCATION: FREIRE IN SCOTLAND, SECOND EDITION

Gerri Kirkwood and Colin Kirkwood. Sense Publishers, Boston, 2011, 192 pages.

There are a lot of books about, and by, Paulo Freire. A quick Amazon.ca search turns up over 8,000 titles (including an interesting-looking one by former OISE adult educator Daniel Schugurensky). The Freire canon grows steadily over the years and seems to cover more and more ground, so the first question when confronted by a book initially published in the 1980s has to be “does this tell us anything sufficiently important to retain its place among the others?” To answer this question, I believe it is important to understand a little about the origins of the text.

In the early 1980s when I was a community educator in Edinburgh, the city was divided. On one side were the tourists and the finance sector and the whisky shops, just like today. On the other side were huge areas of bleak council estates leading Europe in hard drug abuse and HIV infection. The second Edinburgh received considerable attention from community-based educators, most of whom were politically active and radical. The local authority paid for their work within and against the state. Educators worked with local activists to lobby for better transport, more accessible child care, better employment programs, and all the other state provisions that could ameliorate the bitter poverty and entrenched unemployment of post-industrial Scotland under Thatcher. Nobody who was there could ever forget it. It was a hard time, but also a time of clear divisions, when binaries of us and them made more sense than they do today. It was clear who was being hurt by industrial and cultural shifts, and who was benefiting.

During this time a small group of adult educators came together at Adult Learning Project (ALP, pronounced like a mountain) in a shop lying to the west of the city centre. For many community educators, they were heroes. They had taken the ideas of a radical Brazilian with a difficult name and brought them to Scotland as a way to work with local people. The ALP team had projects about childhood, about Scottish identity, and about the experience of women within a traditional working-class society. They followed Freire’s ideas closely but not mindlessly, adapting where it made sense. They called on academics to enter dialogue with people who left school at 14—a part of Freire’s work frequently overlooked by Freirian projects—and mostly it worked. They didn’t change the face of Scotland in the 1980s, but they did work with many of the people who went on to write the policies for the new Scottish government in the early years of the 20th century.

This book is the story of ALP written by two of the founders and originally published in 1989. New authors have added a new introduction and a chapter on ALP since 1990, but with enormous respect to the new authors I must admit that I do not see these sections as the primary value of the book. The value lies in the descriptions of the methods adopted by the project and the outcomes achieved—which is the originally published text. This is a direct and contemporary account of ALP as a living adult education project using a dramatically different approach to working with adults.

The format of the book is accessible and easy to follow. It begins with the history of ALP, setting it within the educational context of 1980s Scotland. There is then a chapter on Freire and his ideas, which introduces some key terms such as *themes*. The body of the text consists of two chapters providing case studies of ALP projects. At the end of the book are some statistical tables, a Freirian glossary and a selected bibliography that has not been updated for this edition. The illustrations are a bit cheesy to the modern sensibility and some parts of the text are anachronistic, but I believe the book captures the flavour of ALP’s work extremely well. It could easily be used by adult education students today to help them think through what a radical approach might mean, and would provide a far more authentic insight than many more recent texts.

The book should not, however, be used as a Freire primer. Given that it was written in 1989, when a relatively small amount of Freire’s work was available in English, the summary of Freire’s philosophy and educational approach is very good. However, there have been many layers of Freire scholarship since then, and the chapter on Freire’s ideas might appear as an incomplete account. In addition, despite being written in relatively plain English, this chapter could still be a bit confusing. It would be best to read this book alongside other accounts of Freire’s ideas and work.

I spent some time considering whether the book is overly aimed at insiders. As with many similar texts based on experience within a specific educational context, knowledge of that context can help the reader understand some of the nuances. Overall, however, I believe that the text should be transparent to most readers, wherever they are located. The black and white photographs illustrating the book and the authors’ efforts to describe their experience in the most straightforward language possible help achieve this transparency.

Throughout the Freire canon, there are surprisingly few accounts of Freirian ideas being applied in a concrete educational situation and surprisingly many discourses on his ideas. *Living Adult Education* reads as pragmatic, inspirational, and insightful. The sections describing the work of 25 years ago are notably fresh and recognizable to any adult educator working in communities facing poverty and other challenges. To answer the question I asked earlier, this book deserves its place in the contemporary Freirian canon by reminding us of the importance of concrete action and of courage in radical educational work.

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RADICALIZING LEARNING: ADULT EDUCATION FOR A JUST WORLD

Stephen D. Brookfield and John D. Holst. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 2011, 262 pages.

This very thoughtful and at times provocative book introduces a radical perspective of learning to the field of adult education—“radical” in the sense of being “concerned with