

BEYOND LEARNER-CENTERED PRACTICE: ADULT EDUCATION, POWER, AND SOCIETY

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Abstract

At the heart of practice in most conceptions of adult education is the adult learner whose needs for learning, once uncovered, can be met through the effective design of educational programs. There has been increasing dissatisfaction with this view of practice, however, as adult education has moved to a central position in the constitution of social, cultural, and economic life. Learner-centeredness is a naïve position that does not come close to approximating the political and ethical dilemmas nor the contradictions and the possibilities for action in this new situation for adult education. In place of learner-centeredness we suggest that adult education in the next millennium must be seen as a struggle for the distribution of knowledge and power in society. At the heart of practice, then, should be a vision linking adult education, power, and society.

Résumé

La plupart des conceptions andragogiques placent l'apprenant au centre de leur préoccupation pratique. Elles considèrent que les besoins d'apprentissage de celui-ci, une fois identifiés, peuvent être rencontrés grâce au design de programmes éducatifs. Or, cette conception s'est butée à une insatisfaction croissante alors que la pratique andragogique s'établissait au cœur la vie sociale, culturelle et économique. La notion d'intervention centrée sur l'apprenant est naïve et ne rend pas compte des dilemmes politiques et éthiques, ni des contradictions et des possibilités d'action dans le nouveau contexte. À l'aube du nouveau millénaire, nous suggérons plutôt une représentation de l'andragogie qui étaye la lutte pour une distribution équitable du savoir et du pouvoir dans la société. La pratique devient alors tributaire d'une vision liant andragogie, pouvoir et société.

The education of adults has played an active part in the on-going constitution of social, economic, political, and cultural life since the beginning of human history. The recognition of the importance of these activities and their

coherence into a field of educational practice, however, took until the 1920s. Signaled by the creation of the American Association for Adult Education in 1926 and the vision of leaders such as Eduard Lindeman and Alain Locke, adult education was seen as an important means to bring "democratic participation to adults who throughout their lifespan struggle to participate in social and economic decisions affecting them" (Heaney, 1996, p. 5). Over the past 75 years the many and varied institutions of society, from trade unions to higher education, from local community-based organizations to multi-national corporations, have increasingly turned to adult education to fashion a society in terms of their own interests and values. As one observer of the world-wide growth of adult education notes:

The formal structures of adult education reach literally tens of millions of adults throughout the world in a complex and intricate variety of adult education offerings....Aside from the formal channels of media communication, the combined network of adult education structures reach a larger proportion of the world's population than any other single form of communication. (Hall, 1997, p. 18)

At the Heart of Practice: The Adult Learner?

Alongside this 75 year growth in adult education as an important social activity has been its identification as a field of practice. There has always been a sense of optimism about adult education as a field. As Knowles (1980) explains, adult education

brings together into a discrete social system all the individuals, institutions, and associations concerned with the education of adults and perceives them as working towards common goals of improving the methods and materials of adult learning, extending the opportunities for adults to learn, and advancing the general level of our culture. (p. 25)

This optimism stems from the belief that by helping adults learn, adult educators improve the lives of individuals, increase the effectiveness of organizations, and meet the needs of society. The most important element in this view is the relationship between learners and educators. Robertson (1996) synthesizes this relationship in saying that the "most influential images of exemplary adult educators include Belenky's mid-wife, Brookfield's skillful teacher, Daloz's mentor, Freire's partner, Knowles' andragogue, and Mezirow's emancipatory educator" (p. 41). These images of practice "urge adult educators to develop trusting, caring relationships with adult learners and to give their professional hearts and souls over to helping those learners to experience empowering paradigm shifts. Surely this goal is above reproach" (p. 43).

This view of practice is a very comforting one for adult educators. At the heart of practice is *the adult learner* whose needs for learning, once uncovered, can be met through the effective design of educational programs. These learning needs can be about any topic, and met anywhere or anytime. As the Council on the Continuing Education Unit (1984) state in *Principles of Good Practice*,

A generally accepted purpose of continuing education programs is to help maintain, expand, and improve individual knowledge, skills (performance), and attitude and, by so doing, equally meet the improvement and advancement of individuals, professions, and organizations. Therefore, a primary emphasis in the principles of good practice is on the individual learner. (p. 3)

By serving the needs of the individual, organizations and society are improved because “a society whose central dynamic, change—economic and technological, political, social, cultural, even theological—requires a citizenry that is able to change” (Knowles, 1980, p. 36). The highest professional and moral principle for adult educators, then, is to involve learners in identifying their needs. Key metaphors are to build on the experience of these potential adult learners, hearing their “voice” which often has been silenced, or giving them access to learning opportunities which historically have been denied. In this scenario of practice, adult educators become facilitators of learning, who often have to “get around” social and organizational structures to “help” serve these adult learners.

There has been increasing dissatisfaction with this view of practice, however, as adult education has moved to a central position in the constitution of social life. Although adult education has always been an expression of wider processes of social power, conflict, and change, its widespread use by institutions of the state, the market, and civil society has highlighted the need to understand its relationship to society. Most people know that adult education has a role in the distribution not only of knowledge, but also in social, cultural, and economic power. If adult education did not have these material effects, no one would care very much about it. Would American employers have spent \$210 billion on education for 59 million adults in 1996 (“Statistical Picture,” 1997) if these activities did not have a demonstrable effect on the economic and social life of its institutions? Would thousands of campesinos in El Salvador have educated themselves through popular education for a decade in the middle of a war and poverty (Hammond, 1998) unless they saw its connection to political struggle and social transformation? Would the policy makers and law makers of the U.S. government have made “Welfare-to-Work” programs central to the new \$16.4 billion welfare reform legislation (D’Amico, 1997) without a

vision of how this form of adult education connects to wider social relations? Would traditionally black and colored trade unions in post-apartheid South Africa come to the planning table with the new, democratic government for the first time in history to make educational policy for workers (Cooper, 1998) without an understanding of how this could re-shape political relationships in their union and country? Can the presidents of higher education institutions in the U.S. be immune to the wider political-economic changes in society if 45 percent of their students are now over the age of 25 (Levine & Cureton, 1998)? Could the President's Commission on Race (1998) recommend a variety of forms of adult education to remedy racial prejudice, privilege, and disparities without understanding that it would have an effect on the redistribution of power in society?

Adult education has become a high stakes political activity whereby multiple stakeholders seek to successfully negotiate their interests through adult education. In this regard we review three different conceptions of the political in adult education practice, explaining why we believe that learner-centeredness is a politically naive position that cannot, and an ethically blind position that should not, be the basis of adult education practice. Finally, we suggest that at the heart of practice should be a vision linking adult education, power, and society.

Three Views on Politics and Practice

This section identifies three alternative views of practice and the place of power and politics in each. These first two offer explicitly political perspectives which can be roughly grouped into two strands: the pragmatic strand and the structural analysis strand. Both strands have long historical antecedents in the field, as well as current manifestations. These stand in contrast to the learner-centered strand, in which the politics are implicit, but nonetheless quite important

The Political Is Practical: The Ability To Get Things Done

The pragmatic strand defines politics primarily within the confines of the institutional setting, takes the given social order as acceptable, and is mainly concerned with the ability to get things done. It is not philosophically opposed to the learner-centered view of practice, but sees it as incomplete in the real world due to its political naivete. Certainly Clark's (1958) book on the marginality of adult education in the Los Angeles public school system spoke to many, if not all, adult educators. His themes continue to this day as we worry about the place of adult education in the "parent" institutions in which it is embedded. We worry about the constant tension between the learning and education agendas of our programs and their intersection with the political-

economic agendas of the institutions in which we work. This concern with the everyday hustle-bustle of politics is recognized by any adult educator who has spent more than 24 hours in the field; it is emphasized by Thomas (1991) when he says "In practice adult education has always meant politics and nothing in this respect has changed," (p. 301). As Griffith (1976) found in his review of the literature on adult education and politics, however, "Few articles dealing with political acumen and activities of adult educators can be found in the adult education literature" (p. 270). Although adult educators are constantly concerned with the issue of politics in practice, this strand is largely underground in the literature of adult education.

It is true that any practicing adult educator, regardless of his or her ideological stance, needs to attend to issues of power and politics. However, this strand has come in for criticism for its largely unprincipled attention to the *how-to* of politics, leaving aside issues of *what-for*. As Forester (1989) explains about the wider organizational literature, this view "first found great favor for being practical, but then inspired no end of criticism for being unprincipled...admonishing us to 'make do'" (p. 32). Thus, although this strand helps adult educators to recognize that they have to negotiate organizational politics, it lacks a social vision and is silent about questions of whose interests should be served by adult education. This stands in contrast to the next strand, which has an explicit ethical stance and social vision.

The Political Is Structural: Redistributing Power

The second strand has always been centered on a relational view of education in terms of the wider systems of society, sees socially structured power relations as advantaging certain groups and disadvantaging other groups in society, and has a clear social commitment to using adult education to redistribute this power (Apple, 1996). In contrast to the first strand, this one asks us as adult educators to lift our vision outside of the organizational systems of practice, (a) to see the power relations in the wider society as they play out in adult education, and (b) to enact a commitment to change—not to accept—the inequitable systems that structure adults' daily lives. Politics in this strand is not about the ability to get things done but rather "is concerned with the means of producing, reproducing, consuming, and accumulating material and symbolic resources" (Morrow & Torres, 1995, p. 464).

The common cause for adult education in this strand is not the generic adult learner, but adult learners who are oppressed by socially structured power relations along economic, racial, cultural, or gendered lines. The relational view of education is stressed, as Mayo (1994) explains in comparing two prominent theorists in this strand, Freire and Gramsci, who believe that adult education

is not neutral and is very much tied to the hegemonic/counter-hegemonic interests within a given society...Radical adult education initiatives, therefore, underline a commitment to a cause. The common cause in Gramsci's and Freire's writings is the struggle against oppression caused by the exploitation of 'subaltern' groups by dominant, hegemonic ones. (p. 139)

Similarly, Newman (1994) forcefully argues that adult educators can put a face on these inequitable relations of power, and thus determine who the learners should be:

The problem for adult educators constrained by the ideals of decency, detachment and civic responsibility is that we do live in a world where we have harsh and unpalatable conflicts of interests, and where we have real and tangible enemies...We have irresponsible and lawless multinationals that put profit before anything else, and whose executives ignore or deny the humanity of the people they employ. We have racists....We have corporate oligarchies, groups of the "elite," people with access to power and privilege who try to restrict the extent to which ordinary people exercise democracy. (p. 31)

There is a strong impetus to not only see education relationally, but also to use education to re-shape these systems to a more just, equitable life for all people.

This perspective clearly draws attention to the political and ethical nature of adult education. Its insights show how existing societal relations of power shape adult educational activities and offer encouragement to foster dialogue, democracy, individual freedom, and social justice. Yet, although it forces our vision outward to the impact of adult education on the wider society, it has been criticized for failing to provide a concrete understanding of practice. Apple (1986) clearly agrees in terms of the wider field of education: "We have a relatively highly developed body of meta-theory, but a seriously underdeveloped tradition of applied, middle-range work," (p. 200). In terms of adult education, Youngman (1996) points out:

The consideration of social and political theory derives its importance from its usefulness in clarifying the contexts of the practical activity of adult education. Indeed, it is in the content, methods and processes of the teaching learning situation that the adult educator concretizes abstractions such as democracy and equality. (p. 27)

Similarly, Walters (1996) points out that "our understanding of micro educational practices, which are crucial in mediating our macro politics, is not necessarily advancing" (p. 294).

A second criticism of this view has been its nearly universal focus on learners who are oppressed, leaving untouched and unexamined those who have power and privilege. However, increasingly, there is a call to see that all adult educators are social activists, regardless of their particular vision of society. No adult educator is released from responsibility for acting on the societal relations of power. Hall (1997) points out,

Elements of this shift from the vision of a world which doesn't work to a world which might work better are possible to include in literally any course or programme that can be conceived. It may require some extra effort, it may require the development of a whole new set of tools or ways of working, but it can be done and it is important to try (p. 18).

Hall emphasizes that even though the course may be technical or vocational, or otherwise circumscribed, there is always something an adult educator can do to draw attention to possibilities of change.

The Political Is Personal: Romancing the Adult Learner

The questions we pose in the first section illustrate that adult education is demonstrably connected to and gains its significance from its relationships with the wider social, economic, political, and cultural systems in society. The dominant view of practice in adult education has staked its claim around the uniqueness of the "adult learner," whereby the highest moral and professional standard is assessing the needs of learners. In this view it doesn't matter if the adult learner is an hourly worker, a manager, or a venture capitalist; a Ku Klux Klan leader or the NAACP leadership. This view of adult education has turned the aphorism "the personal is political" on its head. Rather than seeing that the power relationships in the wider social relations are played out in the practice of adult education, this view asks us as adult educators to believe that the political is personal. By obliterating from view the racial, economic, and gendered power relationships that provide the grounds on which we live our daily lives, we are left with generic adult learners whose needs should be assessed. It is time to stop romancing the generic adult learner in our language and literature, because the fundamental problem with learner-centeredness as a guiding principle is that

as a pedagogy it is inherently ambivalent and capable of many significations. There is a need to stop seeing experiential learning...as a natural characteristic of the individual learner or as a pedagogical technique, and more in terms of the contexts, socio-cultural and institutional, in which it functions and from which it derives its significations. (Usher, Bryant, & Johnston, 1997, p. 105)

What is significant about the examples of adult education implicit in our opening questions is not that these are generic adults learning some generic content. Nor is it that some generic adult educators have facilitated the learning of these adults using principles of adult education. What these examples exemplify is that the context for the practice of adult education is not simply the background in which generic adult learners are served. Rather, the social location of trade union, the university, the popular education program, and the corporation provide the significance and meaning for the adult education offered. The trade union or the Human Resources Development department offers programs for workers who are defined in terms of economic relationships with management and owners of capital. These are not generic adult learners, but specific adult learners whose participation can only be understood within the material order of this social location. The educational program itself cannot be neutral with respect to the social and economic relations of power in the setting of the corporation, but necessarily carries with it a social vision. Adult education is never practiced on a neutral stage, but rather in a particular social location defined by both a particular social vision and particular systems of social, economic, and cultural relations of power.

Beyond Learner-Centeredness as a Basis for Practice

By failing to account for issues of power and politics in its understanding of practice, learner-centeredness cannot and should not be a basis of practice in adult education. In this section, we identify four fundamental issues in practice that are not addressed effectively in a learner-centered view of adult education. The first three issues speak to the central political question, Who benefits from adult education? The fourth issue speaks to the question, Who should benefit from adult education?

There Are Always Multiple Interests at Stake in any Adult Education Activity

Learner-centeredness sees the social and organizational context as an empty container for action, undefined by the wider systems of power that make action possible and give meaning to education. However, adult education always happens in places that have a material existence, where socially organized relations of power define both the possibilities for action as well as the meaning of the learning for all stakeholders. By restricting the scope of vision to the adult learner, this view is politically naive, ignoring the multiple interests that are at stake, the many needs being negotiated, in any adult education program. This is a fictional account of what is at stake in adult

education because it does not extend the question to, Who benefits beyond the learner?

There Are No Generic Adult Learners

The romancing of the generic adult learner loses sight of the fact that adults are embedded in different social realities, that they exist in structurally defined hierarchies of everyday life, and that these differences matter at a most fundamental level. As Griffin (1983) points out:

The category of adulthood in relation to education is being displaced and relegated to more of a procedural or methodological role. Social policy and legislation addresses itself not so much to a generalized and culturally prescriptive idea of adulthood but to more specific target populations of workers, women, the elderly, ethnic groups... From this point of view a general concept of adulthood has become impractical in societies so heterogeneous that it could not convey the diversity of conditions in which people actually live. (p. 200)

Although adults are, of course, an important part of adult education practice, they enter this process marked by their location within larger systems of power and privilege that have shaped their experience and named their "voice." So the issue is not as simple as voice but whose voice.

There Is No Innocent Place in which Adult Educators Can Act

Like the adult learner, adult educators also enter the educational practice as a participant in larger systems of power and privilege, whose actions are both enabled and constrained by their place in these systems. Adult educators stand to benefit personally, organizationally, socially, and economically from the adult education programs for which they are responsible. Thus, they cannot be seen as a neutral facilitator of learning, standing in an innocent place with respect to the wider consequences of their educational efforts. As such, learner-centeredness is politically naive and incompatible with the effective exercise of political power. Their efforts cannot be exempt from the systems of power and privilege that permeate the rest of people's lives together.

Who Should Benefit Is Always Answered in Practice

Finally, in addition to failing to account for political relationships in the places of adult education, learner-centeredness does not address the question of who should benefit from adult education. In this view, all learning is good; adult educators should not and cannot distinguish the social benefits of various adult education programs. That is, it does not ask the question, Adult education for what? In other words, Whose interests should matter? In a similar vein, economists Daly and Cobb (cited in Greider, 1997) argue that "when we

measure economic growth as growth in the Gross National Product, we don't subtract anything...we assume it's all good" (p. 452). Thus, they created an Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare that started with the assumption that everyone shares a collective interest in the balance sheet of the larger natural world. Their Index subtracted the obvious losses—consumption of nonrenewable resources, costs of air pollution—and the picture of American prosperity looked quite different. By placing the learner at the center of educational practice, where the highest ethical principle is *always involve the learner* in the educational process, the resultant measurement of adult education productivity is, by analogy to Daly and Cobb's work, a Gross Learning Product. However, most adult educators know that there is always a particular vision of a better society deriving from the social and organizational context in which it occurs. And the particular vision is what really matters in the ongoing constitution of people's social, economic, political lives together. Thus, as a guide to practice this seemingly ethically innocent principle is no guidance at all.

At the Heart of Practice: Adult Education, Power, and Society

We have argued that adult education needs to move beyond the fiction of the generic adult learner. As adult education plays an increasingly vital role in the constitution of the society and the economy, the idea of "meeting the needs of the learner" is not a viable guiding principle. Now that adult educators are at the planning tables with multiple stakeholders who want their needs met, they no longer have the luxury of simply meeting the "needs" of the romanticized adult learner. For we have to ask, What happens when adult educators meet real systems of power and privilege in our classrooms, institutions, and communities? In our world where adult education happens, learner-centeredness is a naive position that does not come close to approximating the political and ethical dilemmas, the contradictions, and the possibilities of action.

Adult education cannot be a neutral activity in the continual struggle for the distribution of knowledge and power in society. This is hardly a new idea, as most people recognize that the policies, practices, and institutions of adult education are caught up in the conflicts and constitution of economic, cultural, social, and political systems. The important question, then, is not whether adult education is connected to these conflicts and processes, but how and why. These questions call for a relational analysis that takes seriously the idea that adult education does not stand above the unequal relations of power that structure the wider systems in society. Rather, we believe that the institutions and practices of adult education not only are structured by these relations, but also play a role in reproducing or changing them. The starting point for

undertaking this relational analysis in practice is that: "education represents both a struggle for meaning and a struggle over power relations. Thus, education becomes a central terrain where power and politics operate out of the lived culture of individuals and groups situated in asymmetrical social and political positions" (Mohanty, 1994, p. 147). This relational view requires that we as adult educators always ask that timeless political question about our efforts in adult education: Who benefits? Necessarily tied to this question is the ethical one: Who should benefit? The increasing importance of adult education in the constitution of social, political, economic, and cultural life demands no less.

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