

PERSONAL PRACTICE AS AN ELEMENT OF EMANCIPATORY ADULT EDUCATION

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Abstract

"Personal practice" is suggested for adult educators involved in emancipatory adult education. The concept is based upon Michael Polanyi's personal knowledge. Personal practice is based on educators' and learners' social and moral relationships with each other. It is contrasted with individualistic adult education that is based upon principles of technical rationalism—objectivity and detachment.

Résumé

La «pratique personnelle» est recommandée aux andragogues qui exercent la pédagogie de la libération. Ce concept puise son origine dans les écrits de Michael Polanyi sur le savoir personnel. La pratique personnelle définit la relation sociale et morale entre éducateur et apprenant. On peut lui opposer la notion d'éducation «individualisante» inspirée de principes rationalistes tels que l'objectivité et le désengagement.

Emancipatory adult educators work with people in their political and social contexts to effect positive change in their personal and collective lives. This essay explores an element of practice which focuses on relationships between adult educators, the world in which we work, and the people with whom we work. I believe these relationships are of primary importance in emancipatory education. The principles and values of the educator, rather than the methods or techniques she or he employs, determine the quality of relationships, the day to day practices, and ultimately the results, of emancipatory education efforts.

I find the concept of "personal practice" very useful to describe an effective relationship among the emancipatory adult educator, learners, and the world. The concept is based on Michael Polanyi's work, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-critical Philosophy*. He sees the personal as a viable alternative to the dualistic ideas of objectivity and subjectivity.

I think we may distinguish between the personal in us, which, actively enters into our commitments, and our subjective states in which we merely endure our feelings. This distinction establishes the conception of the *personal* which is neither subjective nor objective. In so far as the personal submits to requirements acknowledged by itself as independent of itself, it is not subjective; but in so far as it is an action guided by individual passions, it is not objective either. It transcends the disjunction between subjective and objective.¹

¹ Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), 300.

Personal practice recognizes that the individual adult educator does affect how education occurs even while she or he is situated in a very specific social, political and cultural location. This view contrasts with technical-rational approaches to adult education, for example, "competency-based education" and "self-directed learning" which focus on method in an ahistorical context.² Who the adult educator is is not relevant. Rather, the correct application of the method is seen as the key to success.

Promoters of a technical-rational approach to adult education aim to streamline and standardize the practice of education, moulding it as a technique, rather than a craft.

The following passage on the "art of science" can be applied to education to further illuminate the idea of personal practice in adult education.

Desisting henceforth from the vain pursuit of a formalized scientific method, commitment accepts in its place the person of the scientist as the agent responsible for conducting and accrediting scientific discoveries. The scientist's procedure is of course methodical. But his methods are but maxims of an art which he applies in his own original way to the problem of his own choice.³

I also see the adoption of personal practice by educators as a safeguard against the co-optation of radical methods. In applying Paulo Freire's approach to literacy education, as an example, co-optation can occur in two ways:

An institution adopts the form and the rhetoric of Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" in delivering a literacy program, but has at its base the goal of adaptation (accommodation to a modernization agenda, for example) rather than emancipation of the literacy students.⁴

Or, an adult educator wants to use Freire's methods for emancipatory purposes, yet believes in technical rationality and objectivity. The educator expects the method to do the job and thus will only act as an administrator of the steps of codification, thematization, and so on. She or he maintains an emotional distance in order to maintain the ideal of objectivity.

In each case, the method fails because of the absence of a passionate relationship of commitment between the adult educator, the literacy students, their particular context in the world and their goals for education.

Personal practice occurs in the relationship of the individual educator with the social and political context she or he is in *with* learners. The relationship becomes

² Malcolm Knowles, *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: From Pedagogy to Andragogy*, (Cambridge, New York, 1980).

³ Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 312.

⁴ Frank Youngman, *Adult Education and Socialist Pedagogy*, (London: Cromm Helm, 1986).

more complex as the educator continually experiences and creates dialectic relationships between theory and practice, self and world, what is and what ought to be—in a word, “praxis.” It is a process whereby experience and ideology are constantly meeting and modifying one another.

Praxis is different from simply learning by “trial and error.” Trial and error is based on the assumption that the world is a given reality to which people must adapt by randomly groping for clues. In contrast, the dialectical process of praxis is consciously mediated by the will of the educator whose underlying conviction is that the world is changeable by people working together.

Personal practice occurs in each educator’s particular social, historical, cultural, geographical location. The educator’s responsibility is to work with learners to understand these factors and their dynamics as thoroughly as possible in order to combat passivity, fatalism, and conventional thinking, and to thus make the educational experience as relevant as possible.

One example of personal practice is the “organic intellectual,” as articulated by Antonio Gramsci in the 1920s.⁵ The organic intellectual is above all, *in relationship with* the class or social group she or he works with. This is different from the “traditional intellectual” who attempts to detach from everyday life and social and political affiliations in order to achieve the ideal of objectivity. According to Gramsci, traditional intellectuals’ neutrality is an illusion which in fact supports the status quo and allows these intellectuals to develop knowledge on behalf of the powerful without being openly committed to the political elite.

The relationship which unites the organic intellectual with her or his social group (class, gender, race, for example) is an emotional bond of solidarity and identification. The organic intellectual must have feelings as well as knowledge.⁶ The organic intellectual must be able to see the world as it could be, or at least to see the world as possibilities, rather than as given. The organic intellectual’s task requires imagination, desire, will, and courage as well as powers of thought and analysis. These are the elements of belief and commitment Polanyi speaks of in talking about personal knowledge.

Gramsci describes becoming an organic intellectual as a process of sorting out the clash between how one has been told by authorities (church, state, corporate or commercial leaders) to see the world, and how one sees it for oneself and believes it ought to be. These contradictions, once recognized, confront an individual with the choices of passive acceptance of civil authority, rejection of outside references and thus madness, or engagement with the contradictions as an organic intellectual, theorizing and acting for oneself in order to understand and change the world. The latter option is an embodiment of personal practice, in effect, where one embraces

⁵ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 6.

⁶ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 418.

one's own values, beliefs and commitments and acts upon them from the starting point of one's own position in the world.

The organic intellectual's knowledge comes from experience of the contradictions which she or he as an individual encounters in the context of being part of a larger social group or class, then theorizes into an understanding of the world that can be shared by others in the group or class. Organic intellectuals are not simply contemplative. Action they undertake brings new sets of relationships into existence, and thus opportunities for creation of new knowledge about the changed world. This in turn affects the course of action as newly created knowledge is applied to the world. The organic intellectual becomes an educator of her or himself as well as of all the people with whom she or he works, through this dialectical process.

Comparing dialectical personal practice with technical-rational approaches to adult education, one sees there is a deep philosophical difference between them. The technical rational approach which conceives methods in themselves as efficacious, is not oriented to social change or a changeable world.⁷

The detachment of the adult educator using a technical rational approach shows that she or he is striving for objectivity, attempting to avoid the bias her or his personal values and circumstances might have on the outcome. Also, the technical rational approach is based upon the assumption of a world that does not change in any significant way during the course of the educational treatment. The location where education occurs is little more than a setting, or possibly a resource to be used. In the technical rational approach, students are thought of as units with variable characteristics, more or less amenable to the method being used. Any change that occurs in a student is simply an adjustment in her or his characteristics, analogous to their having purchased a commodity. Individual self-improvement is promoted as a way to acquire assets in order to better compete for individual economic, social or political gain.

Personal practice, on the other hand, promotes an expressly social, rather than individual, learning process. That learning is understood to occur in relationship means that the people involved create knowledge together, change the world together, and live in an emerging world together. The learning group is like a web where all members are joined by ties of common interest. Each individual's learning affects the others in the group or organization. Pull on one strand of a web, all points feel the pull.

Personal practice has moral implications quite different from those of a technical-rational approach to adult education. With personal practice, the educator is bound in human relationship to the people she or he works with and the world in which they work together. Relationships are reciprocal and conscious. The connections among people necessarily include values which come out of their original cultures and the emerging co-created group traditions. To violate these values dam-

⁷ Michael Collins, *Adult Education as Vocation: A Critical Role for the Adult Educator*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 2.

ages the relationship and has serious consequences for the educational work, even to the point of totally destroying trust and making it impossible to continue a project. Therefore, when involved in personal adult education practice, one is working in a moral universe which provides the grounds for detection of and protection against co-optation, manipulation and betrayal.

In a technical-rational approach the core value of objectivity also has moral consequences. The detachment required allows technical-rational educators and learners the freedom to act in any way as long as it does not impinge on others' freedom. This is a very individualistic moral universe which "seeks to release us from all responsibility for the holding of our beliefs" ⁸

In a technical rational approach to adult education, the working relationship between educator and participants is likely to be contractual and professional. The marketplace exchange principle of delivering benefit in return for payment of fees is its basis. Since the educator is understood to be separate from the learners (per the ideal of objectivity and detachment), the moral basis for education is formal rather than personal. Professional values, diligence in correct application of the method, objectivity, and accountability are called upon to prevent corruption.

In a technical rational approach to education, the method functions as an instrument. The educator operates the instrument and the students are operated upon for their own benefit. Both the educator and the students defer to the authority of the method. Since the method itself is not a human being, there is an absence of moral connection in the educational process. Thus competent educators and diligent students can be involved in an amoral process whose consequences ordinarily go unexamined. Since the technical-rational approach is also ahistorical, students and educators in this model can end up doing or being part of something they never would have chosen, imagined, willed, or approved.

Personal practice requires adult educators to take on the responsibility that goes along with the power involved in doing educational work. Taking on the consciousness of personal practice is both emancipating and humbling, as one realizes the effect one can have on people's lives. As Polanyi says: "The freedom of the subjective person to do as he pleases is overruled by the freedom of the responsible person to act as he must."⁹

In personal practice the educator has to become aware of her or his power as a leader, as a shaper and director of educative relationships. Power is up front, problematic; a considerable challenge to struggle with in Western cultures where power and authority have frequently been conceived only as instruments of institutional control, and oppression.

In technical-rational adult education, on the other hand, power remains hidden and unspoken. The method is likely to be one of the many shadowy authorities

⁸ Polanyi, 312

⁹ Polanyi, 309

which shape the terrain where educators and learners live and work. The educator who just does her or his job, fulfilling its requirements as a professional, simultaneously wields and is subject to institutional power that ordinarily goes unquestioned.

Personal practice is characterized by thoughtful application of beliefs and values to educational situations. One form of emancipatory education that developed in North America was the feminist consciousness-raising group. One of the women who was involved in organizing early groups spoke of how they worked:

There has been no one method of raising consciousness. What really counts are not the methods, but results. The only 'methods' of consciousness raising are essentially principles.¹⁰

In her article on consciousness-raising as a form of critical pedagogy, Mechtild Hart cautions educators not to look for a technique or recipe for consciousness-raising. She says it is up to the educator to carefully consider whether a situation is one where consciousness-raising would be effective, and then to use one's own judgment, experience, and understanding of the historical moment as one proceeds. In effect, she says it is a mistake to try to carry out emancipatory education work if one is not personally committed and politically aware.

Looking at the history of the Highlander Folkschool in Tennessee, it is apparent that Myles Horton's personal practice made a big difference in Appalachia and the United States as a whole. Highlander was a significant force in the struggles to unionize coal miners in the 1930s and 40s, and in the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 60s.¹¹

When I visited Highlander in 1994, I asked the present director, John Gaventa, how Horton was able to be such an effective emancipatory educator. He said that Myles would attend meetings and mostly stay quiet, but he would ask important questions at just the right moment so that the course of the meeting would carry on to a constructive conclusion.

It would be impossible to translate Myles Horton's personal practice into a method or technique. His effectiveness came from his deeply rooted values, his commitment to his own philosophy, his belief that the world could be changed by people working together and his knowledge and understanding of the people with whom he was working. It was in this context that his questions became meaningful turning points that engaged the listeners. The depth of his relationships allowed him to be in tune with the whole political and social situation so that he knew when to remain silent, and when he should speak.

¹⁰ Mechtild U. Hart, "Liberation Through Consciousness Raising" Chapter 3 in Jack Mezirow and Associates, *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood: A Guide to Transformative and Emancipatory Learning*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1990), 57.

¹¹ F. Adams, *Unearthing the Seeds of Fire: The Idea of Highlander*, (Winston Salem NC: John F. Blair, 1975).

Educators like Myles Horton, Freire, the feminist leaders of consciousness-raising groups, and Gramsci's organic intellectuals are all emancipatory adult educators who took their personal convictions into the world and made a difference as educational leaders. I think their stories need to be told and re-told, and the creative power of their ways of working needs to be acknowledged and built upon.

The trend toward increasing standardization, certification, professionalization and technical rationalism in the field of adult education not only has implications for the meaning of adult learning, but it also diminishes adult educators' working lives. If our work is reduced to the administration of techniques and tests, if our relationships are increasingly formalized and bureaucratized, if our knowledge is detached from everyday life and the world we live in, we become empty shells, alienated and atomized. Technical-rational adult education standardizes the teacher as well as the student.

Adult educators can combat the technical rational trend by taking on the consciousness of personal practice. One's own strongly held beliefs, ongoing learning through praxis, and the valuing of relationships between self, other learners and the world can make a difference in how the field of adult education unfolds. By not surrendering our own authority to methods, tests, quantifiable measures, emancipatory adult education as personal practice liberates the educator as well as the learner.