

**ADULT EDUCATION, EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AND SOCIAL CHANGE: THE POSTMODERN CHALLENGE.**

Danny Wildemeersch and Theo Jansen (Eds.) (1992). VUGA Reeks Vormings: En Ontwikkelingswerk Uitgeverij B.V., 's-Gravenhage

In April of 1991, as a part of a two year project, a group of adult education theorists and practitioners from across Europe met at a seminar in Belgium to examine critically the issues of experiential learning and social transformation as a part of the field of adult education. Traditional beliefs and concepts that were once held to be self-evident in a modernist tradition were challenged by these educators. In this collection of thirteen chapters, they have attempted to gain a more insightful understanding of their work by examining it from a postmodern perspective. The result of their work is a provocative book, which encourages the reader to develop new ways of approaching theory and practice in the field of adult education on both sides of the Atlantic.

The first chapter discusses a number of the common themes which run throughout the book and gives a brief summation of each of the chapters. The conceptual framework outlined by Weil and McGill which defines four villages of experiential learning is outlined, with an emphasis given to how people "purposefully" reflect upon their learning experiences, and how they actively "give personal meaning" to reality. The challenges of applying a postmodern perspective to adult education is discussed, particularly with regards to the issue of self-responsibility of the learner, and the dependency of individuals on larger organizations.

In the next chapter Wildemeersch considers the role of theory in adult education. He argues that meaningful learning-processes involve a combination of everyday reflection and more formal theoretical analysis (p. 23). He questions the concept of the autonomous learner, and examines the feminist critique of the critical theoretical perspective. Wildemeersch acknowledges that he has been "forced to re-examine and reflect upon his own beliefs as an adult educator, to examine the ambiguities of autonomy and heteronomy, and to accept that plurality and difference are inevitable outcomes of democratic learning and teaching" (p. 29). In a somewhat unclear conclusion he explains that while there will be no ultimate "correct" answers, he believes that educators have responsibilities to be developed within the context of communicative interaction rather than through autonomous experiences.

In the third chapter Koen Raes states that "the postmodern world is antitheoretical and that the very legitimacy of intellectual activity is increasingly challenged" (p. 35). He argues that even though we no longer accept the grand theories of the past it does not mean that we have to do away with all theorizing. We cannot make a radical break from modernity, because we cannot "question all practices, all claims to truth, validity, legitimacy, etc. simultaneously, because we would lose any ground for questioning at all" (p. 46). Raes states that the

postmodern critique has shown us the importance of understanding language and the influence it has on shaping our views. Both oral and written language have similar constraints and influences and have functioned historically as a source of power. He warns that we have to retain the ability to reason, and accepts that there will be a multiplicity of perspectives in a postmodern world.

In the fourth chapter Dirk Van Damme looks at educational optimism as an underlying dogma which claims that education can solve most social problems. He states that educational optimism is a legacy of the Enlightenment, and discusses how, increasingly, the educational system is expected to assume responsibilities traditionally assigned to the community, family, and church, teaching about topics such as sexuality and racism. The education system is also expected to deal with new social problems such as the environment and drug addiction. In addition, the education system is under pressure to provide more programs for people who want credentials that will allow them to participate in a competitive economy. From a postmodernist perspective, Van Damme argues that educational optimism seems very naive, as education may actually be used oppressively and tends to reinforce existing inequalities rather than change them. He does not believe that the educational system can continue to be taxed by an unending extension of different programs, but he acknowledges (perhaps from the view of being an educational optimist himself) that the appeal exists because "an educational approach to social problems tends to be a more human, less alienating and less offensive strategy than many other human interventions" (p. 61).

The next chapter by Patrick Allegaert and Luc Vanmarcke is filled with a variety of literary excerpts that supposedly illustrates the postmodern condition. The significance of these (a kiwi is a postmodern fruit?!!) elude this particular reader. The most important point this chapter makes is that "there is a need for adult education to retain substantial rationality, or some sense of autonomy, because otherwise it will be overtaken by functional rationality, which can be seen in the tendency in the adult education field towards professionalisation, utilitarianism, and marketing" (p. 72).

The issue of theorising experiential learning is explored by Chrysoula Kosmidou and Robin Usher in the sixth chapter. Like several other authors in this book, they argue that individuals are not completely autonomous because each person is situated in the world. The individual is an abstraction, because we are by nature social beings, not only influenced by society, but also a part of it. At the same time, however, people retain some independence of thought, despite external influences. Language is an important meaning-giving system, and serves to define our experiences. Discourses are important even though they can be a source of conflict, because some become more dominant, powerful, and influential than others. However, people can resist power, and they always have the capacity for change.

Kosmidou and Usher discuss the importance of reflecting on one's actions, so one develops a greater sense of agency because the action is not purposeless. They argue that "a critical theoretical stance can also assist students to attain autonomy and lead to personal and social transformations" (p. 87).

In the seventh chapter on "Experiential learning and modernity," Theo Jansen and Jumbo Klercq discuss how theories are subject to external influences, just as knowledge and concepts are. "Reflexive modernisation" means that there is a constant erosion of historically evolved institutions and concepts, so many theories that were long accepted are now being challenged by a postmodern perspective. Individuals, through "reflexive biographies" have also become aware of a multitude of choices and opportunities that did not used to exist, or were previously strongly determined by external influences such as the family or community (p. 95). Memories of the past no longer seem to have any bearing on decisions for current situations. Understanding of local areas is no longer sufficient for reflection and understanding of one's life experiences, because globalization impacts on everyone's lives in ways which are often not immediately apparent.

Jansen and Klercq argue that while experiential learning evolves from, and is suited to, a fragmented life, it is insufficient because it neglects aspects of ideology and power. The role of responsible educators must include informing students about a wide range of information, not just the areas that are of current interest to them. Informal theories must be confronted with formal ones, which are outside the scope of everyday practice of the learning subject. Educators have to present a critical perspective "not as dogmatic truths, but rather as challenges of dominant prejudices and unreflected suppositions" (p. 101).

These authors believe that there is a need for metatheoretical input—global theories which offer new perspectives for the modern conditions of existence at large. The challenges posed for adult educators are to first of all develop and understand these theories, then to be able to make the links between the student's experiences and these types of theories, and finally, to change organizational conditions as well as the ability to motivate the learner. This is a thoughtful, well developed chapter, and if one were to make only a single selection from this book to read, this is the one I would recommend.

In the eighth chapter, Frans Berkers tries to show how postmodernity can be analyzed by taking the concept of experiential learning as a starting point. He emphasizes that people need more than basic subsistence—they need culture. "This influences the way in which people in their daily lives think about vital problems and the ways in which they reach decisions relating to these problems" (p. 107). From a postmodern perspective many of our past philosophies and the "great myths" or "great ideologies" have eroded, but there is nothing to replace them with. He says that utilizing the sociological imagination can be a source of power, to develop an individual's way of thinking, and he cites a need for wilful learning. However, his explanation of wilfulness and its link to exemplary experiential learning are not clearly expressed.

Dave O'Reilly's chapter on "Negotiated learning/negotiated knowledge" illustrates some of the difficulties of applying postmodern concepts of learning in a modernist institution. He discusses an independent study program which was introduced at a polytechnic institute in London in 1974. Independent study can be seen as a postmodernist course because of its emphasis on heterogeneity and

difference, student centred focus, and challenges to traditional knowledge. The difficulties with the program were that the institution resisted allowing students to pursue curriculum content which it felt was too radical, such as the study of astrology, since it was out of the boundaries of what academics define as accepted areas of intellectual study. In conclusion he notes that while this project eventually folded, other independent schools of study have opened. "While the former failure may indicate to some the impossibility of a postmodern project, others may see the emergence of new forms of independent study as a signal of the inevitable demise of modernism" (p. 134).

In the tenth chapter, Harry Houbin addresses what he calls the "Quality question." In business, quality is measurable by client satisfaction. He doubts whether these same measures can be used in adult education, however, since students might not be in the best position to competently assess their programs. Houbin poses a variety of questions which confront the field of adult education as it operates within a competitive market, in which education is often viewed as a commodity rather than as a discipline which can lead to personal growth and social transformation. He notes that the average client does not want "his emotional life, his expressiveness, his moral-practical rationality to be addressed" (p. 143). The consequence for adult education programs, is that it is more important for a program to look good, so that it can be marketed, than for it to be good.

The eleventh chapter by Danny Wildemeersch examines many of the challenges which are facing the adult education field. He says "We must not only wonder what the future will look like. We must simultaneously wonder what kind of future we want" (p. 155). Adult educators are being called upon to make important decisions. These decisions are often difficult to make because we do not have long established criteria to base our choices on. We are faced with many challenges, such as long standing structural unemployment, environmental concerns, and the need for racial and gender equality. There is a responsibility to make informed decisions, in order to ensure that adult education will obtain a respected position in society.

The final chapter by Laure van Loosbroek, examines Theme-Centred Interaction (TCI) which is an approach to experiential learning developed by a Jewish psychoanalyst who fled from Nazi-Germany to America. She explains the purpose and value of the program, and concludes that TCI has a future because it is situated in the intersection of modernism and postmodernism. The openness of this program towards social change and willingness to accept difference seems to suggest that it may be able to adapt to a postmodern world.

*Adult Education, Experiential Learning and Social Change: The Postmodern Challenge* does not present a cohesive or comfortable view of some of the changes taking place in the field of adult education. The contributors hold different "visions" of adult education, some focused more on the diversification of learners, or particular programs, and others were more troubled by the political implications of a changing global economy and environment. Some felt that a critical

perspective of education had to be developed, while others rejected this, or called for a multiplicity of viewpoints.

The general consensus of the authors from a postmodern perspective is that the field of adult education has changed dramatically from its traditional origins, and one can no longer look back at formerly held "grand narratives" for answers. Focusing completely on the individual also seems to pose problems, however, since individual experience has a limited capacity to offer insights into the nature of larger social problems. No individual can possibly be aware of the multitude of factors which impinge on their existence, and the subjective interpretation of each individual is affected by many external factors.

Adult educators are also questioning their ability to effect social transformations, and whether in fact it is their role to attempt to do this. Many of the authors are concerned about the process of instrumental rationalization which is effecting adult education by subjecting it to marketing and consumer whims, rather than focusing on more fundamental issues.

Parts of the book were not clearly understandable, and in places the translation to English is awkward; i.e., "touch the sore" rather than "touch on a sore point" (p. 158). It is an interesting book, however, because it presents a mixture of new and challenging ideas about experiential learning and social change in a postmodern world. In many ways this book poses more questions than it answers, but it serves as a starting point for discussion about the role of adult education in the future.

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***FASHIONING FARMERS: IDEOLOGY, AGRICULTURAL KNOWLEDGE AND THE MANITOBA FARM MOVEMENT, 1890-1925.***

Jeffery M. Taylor (1994). Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, University of Regina

The cover for *Fashioning Farmers* describes it as examining "the educational institutions that developed in Manitoba agriculture before 1925, the dominant ideologies that arose within these institutions, and the impact these ideologies had on the agrarian movement within the province." The author argues that the curriculum developed by the Manitoba Agricultural College produced a "knowledge" and an "identity" that displaced an older radical agrarian ideology. This book is therefore important for educational scholars who are interested in understanding the formation of knowledge and Canadian identity as well as the roots of adult education.

The book begins by explaining the historical context including the growth of state education structures and the agrarian, working class, and women's movements. It then provides a more detailed outline of the educational institutions with chapter three dedicated to an examination of the Manitoba Agricultural