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# CRITICAL SOCIAL THEORY: A PERSPECTIVE FOR CRITIQUING PROFESSIONALIZATION IN ADULT EDUCATION

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## Abstract

This article explores how critical social theory can provide a perspective for critiquing professionalization in adult education. In so doing the nature of the relationship between the professionalization and social movement trends in adult education is addressed. A number of concepts articulated within critical theory are discussed for their relevance to the professionalization issue. Habermas's work is highlighted, drawing parallels to the work of Freire. Lastly, the specific issues and questions raised by the perspective of critical theory are reflected upon as they apply to the professionalization of adult education today.

## Résumé

Cet article explore la théorie de la critique sociale en tant qu'approche pour une analyse critique de la professionnalisation de l'éducation des adultes. Ce faisant, la nature du lien entre professionnalisation et courants sociaux est spécifiée. Certains concepts propres à la théorie critique sont discutés quant à leur pertinence dans le domaine de la professionnalisation. L'oeuvre de Habermas est mise en lumière et des parallèles sont établis avec l'oeuvre de Freire. Enfin, certaines questions spécifiques dégagées de la théorie de la critique amènent une réflexion sur l'état actuel de la professionnalisation de l'éducation des adultes.

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A decade ago, Gordon Selman and Jindra Kulich described the development of adult education in Canada to be a "shifting balance between adult education as a social movement and as a professional field."[1] In their article, "Between Social Movement and Profession—a Historical Perspective on Canadian Adult Education," they outlined the activities within the field which indicate that "ever since the mid-

1930s there has been creative tension between the professionalization trends and the social movement trends."[2] These authors asserted that commitment to both the social movement tradition and to professionalization is necessary for the field's vitality and advocated that the field unite both social movement and professionalization thrusts in its future development.[3] Today, debates ensue about adult education's professionalization. Claims are levied that, with the present state of professionalization in adult education, the field is dislodging itself from the social thrust of its roots. Social movements within adult education's history, such as the Antigonish Movement, fade into the past. Indeed, many adult educators do not even know about these early beginnings.

Today, it is useful to consider the manner in which professionalization may influence the thinking about adult education in a normative sense. Professionalization, when seen from different points of view, may orient the field in particular directions. For example, some adult educators contend (and warn) that in defining the professionalization of the field as

> those elements which have placed emphasis on providing adult education with a sound theoretical base, have emphasised research and the application of scientific standards to methods, materials and the organisation of the field and have promoted the need for professional training and staffing[4]

the potential exists for scientific standards and the concomitant scientific method of thinking to pervade the field and objectify adult learners. Other adult educators, however, argue that professionalization (as defined above) can only improve the quality of the adult education delivered, is desirable, and has limited potential disadvantages.

When professionalization is considered against the backdrop of the original values of adult education, this dichotomy of viewpoints *sharpens*. As Selman and Kulich point out, in the early years the adult education field was noted for such developments as the social reform efforts of the Antigonish Movement and for the social reform-oriented statements of the Canadian Association for Adult Education.[5] Both organizations shared a commitment to democratic ideals, envisioning adult education as a liberating force. In the words of Moses Coady, a leader of the Antigonish Movement, adult education was to "unlock life for all the people."

Social movements can be progressive or reactionary, can champion the interests of the everyday citizen and the marginalized, or of the

privileged elite. From a theoretical perspective, the social movement's development often follows a pattern which begins with the mobilization of people committed to change. As the group grows, gains momentum, and acts collectively to seek social change, it becomes organized to achieve the tasks at hand. The movement's organization may become increasingly complex and later become institutionalized, although factions may develop and attempt to revitalize the movement. Yet, regardless of the social movement's initial configuration (e.g. many loosely-organized groups) the members possessed a "sufficient sense of common cause to create a movement."[6]

With the social movement's pattern and concept of common cause in mind, some questions arise when considering the definition used by Selman and Kulich to describe the social movement aspect of adult education ("all conscious efforts to improve the nature of society by means of adult education and its wider application in the community"[7]). For instance, whose interests are being served primarily by the "conscious efforts" undertaken—adult learners, adult educators, or adult organizations? Also, what is the nature of the improvement in society being sought—greater social justice, individual fulfilment, or other change?

In attempting to answer these questions for the past or present, one may debate the existence of the field of adult education as a strong, unified social movement in the purely theoretical sense. Yet, solid examples of social reform initiative comprise the historical record of adult education in Canada.[8] In these are found the progressive social movement-type roots. Given the current debate about professionalization, the question must be asked: can the present professionalization of adult education be considered as a neutral trend which temporarily shifts the focus of attention away from social movement concerns?

In this article, this question is addressed by examining briefly the perspective of critical social theory in general and its view with respect to professionalization in particular. The work of Jurgen Habermas will be highlighted, with the orientations of Paulo Freire and members of the earlier Frankfurt School, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, also presented.

## Critical Social Theory

Critical social theory can be distinguished from traditional theory on the basis of the conception of the relationship of nature to history. Traditional theory grants priority to nature whereas critical theory gives priority to the historical world "in which, as the whole, interpretations of nature appear as human constructions."[9]

Traditional theory, in the form of positivist social science, has dealt with human behaviour as if it were an object of scientific inquiry, minimizing the importance of the historical, cultural and social context. Accordingly, social phenomena and human behaviour are subjected to scrutiny through processes which reduce them to manageable units: dependent and independent variables which can be controlled and manipulated. An outcome of employing such a method is that results are obtained which are believed to be explanatory and predictive of human social action. Social practices are subsequently formulated and reformulated upon the recommendations postulated by such research. While proponents of positivist social science justify it on the basis of providing objective results, Habermas argues that "positivism conceals a commitment to technical rationality behind a facade of value freedom"[10] and designates "the idea of a cybernetically self-regulated organization of society as the highest expression of the technocratic consciousness."[11]

In *Knowledge and Human Interests*, Habermas elaborates upon this critique in his critical theory of cognitive interests.[12] He posits a connection among cognitive interests, processes of inquiry, and social organization. The *technical cognitive interest*, concerned with predicting and controlling events in the natural environment, guides the process of inquiry of the empirical/analytic sciences which aims at producing nomological knowledge. The technical interest is grounded in the social organization of work insofar as work involves people in instrumental or purposive-rational action. The *practical cognitive interest*, concerned with attaining intersubjective and self understanding, guides the process of inquiry of the historical/hermeneutic sciences which aim at interpretive understanding. The practical interest is grounded in interaction or communicative action which attempts to gain understanding of the human condition through language and which is governed by consensual norms. The *emancipatory cognitive interest* guides the process of inquiry of the critically-oriented sciences which aims at critical reflection. The emancipatory interest exists in relation to a means of social organization—power.

Underlying Habermas's theory of cognitive interests is a view that modern western society is becoming dominated increasingly by *instrumental rationality*, a rationality oriented towards the goal of increasing the effectiveness of social interventions. The growth of this trend has lead to the supremacy (and domination according to the views of Adorno and Horkheimer) of the scientific method, a method which was intended to enable the realization of the ideals of the Enlightenment, such as "social emancipation from ignorance, unreflected force, and suffering."[13] In addition to distinguishing between reason in the ideal sense of human emancipation and the

actualities of social life, critical theory affirms the ideal of reason, advocating that critical thought must remain separate from and be applied to societal organizations.[14] Indeed, critical theory must critique instrumental rationality.

## Critical Social Theory: Key Concepts Concerning Professionalization

Critical social theory provides a particular perspective for reflecting upon the process of professionalization in social practice. To the extent that professionalization represents an attempt to increase instrumental rationality, a corresponding critique could be provided by critical theory. In particular, the following concepts articulated within critical theory are considered to be central to the issue of professionalization and will be examined with respect to the questions they raise: the assessment of the rationality of instrumental action, the conflict between instrumental reality and communicative action, cultural invasion, colonization of the life-world, the difference between the technical and practical interests, and the application of social science to the social world. Stipulative definitions will not be assigned to these terms but rather their meanings will be brought out of context through the discussion which follows.

Habermas considers that *the rationality of instrumental action* can only be assessed in terms of the success or failure of actions in achieving a goal and that goals themselves are unquestioned, unless they turnout to be unrealizable.[15] This idea identifies an important issue concerning professionalization, namely, to what extent is the question raised: "Is professionalization a desirable goal for adult education?" An implicit acceptance of the desirability is promoted by adult educators who claim better service to adult learners as a result, using a "quality control" argument. Professionalization is often assumed to be the means which will improve the effectiveness of adult educators, thereby justifying the trend in the field towards professionalization. Other arguments supporting this trend and cited in adult education journals are reminiscent of Dreeben's analysis of the advantages of the traditional professions, namely, increased status and power.[16] Professional knowledge, it would seem, is to be equated with technical knowledge that improves the effectiveness of adult education as a social intervention. In Habermas's terms, such a preoccupation is the example of instrumental rationality. Thus, the only criterion available for the evaluation of such professionalized actions in the field is the ability of those actions to provide technical, rational and scientific solutions to andragogical problems.

Critical theory and Habermas's work in particular develop "criticisms of the process of rationalization in Western societies as it has occurred

so far."[17] One extreme forecast of his is that the trend towards increasing instrumental rationality, in which the scientific technique is applied to the management of social affairs, could lead to the end of the individual's autonomous ego organization and self-identity,[18] ultimately leaving society collectively in a state of speechlessness.[19] As extreme and unbelievable as this scenario appears, the pre-conditions and events leading toward this situation offer some points for reflection on the effects of the process of professionalization. In particular, the demise of the philosophical considerations, which occurs when philosophy is replaced by social science,[20] increases the danger that aspiring professionals will think about their vocation and adult learners in ways that are shaped by the mechanistic paradigms of quantitative social science. The potential for critical reasoning to be contained and suppressed also exists when solely technically efficient methods of facilitating and administering education are introduced. If these developments were to proceed unchecked, then the individual (adult educator or learner) may be constrained in his or her capacity to influence the nature of his or her experiences and the institutions in society, leading to a sense of personal powerlessness.

Critical social theory identifies the rationality of social science as linked with technical rationality which is concerned with predicting and controlling events. This type of rationality, while appropriate for the natural sciences, is not deemed by critical theorists to be appropriate for the social world; indeed, critical social theory proposes that a different approach be taken, one rooted in democratic ideals and concerned with social emancipation in which individuals may experience "self-emancipation...from the constraints of unnecessary domination in all its forms."[21] Rather than become objects of a technocratic educational and administrative process which reifies social relationships, separates facts from values, means from ends, and which may "lead to a repression of the category of ethics,"[22] individuals may become active subjects who not only live with societal institutions but also critique them.

This condition of domination is described in similar ways by Paulo Freire's concept of *cultural invasion* and Habermas's notion of *the colonization of the life-world.* From the standpoint of critical social theory, "the technical reorganization of modes of social understanding appears as a form of cultural invasion...the suppression of capacities for cultural and social criticalness."[23] In Habermas's terms, the rationalization of societal action systems which are intended to intervene successfully in the environment or co-ordinate social interaction efficiently, may lead to rationalizing the life-world, the shared understandings, or as Habermas denotes "the horizons of the communicative organization of social relations, themselves encapsulated in the structure of three separable, yet related validity

claims"[24] of truth, truthfulness and normative rightness. When this occurs, these societal action systems become independent from the generally shared life-worlds of people in society by developing procedures and technical language which isolate themselves and the everyday experiences and communication of society-at-large. These systems may become indifferent to the identities, language, social norms and cultural traditions of people, rendering societal members to be objectified and uninvolved observers who have been disenfranchised of their means of articulating critical comments. Thus the technical interest inherent in the rationalization of systems becomes manifest as social systems become devoid of a practical interest in understanding the life-worlds of people or in being accountable to them. When applied to an area such as education, such control by specialists who do not entertain philosophical or contextual considerations but who are rather preoccupied with efficiency and instrumental rationality leads to a situation

> wherein general welfare may become indistinguishable from the most efficient administration of society's affairs or the practice of social control by agencies especially designated to engage in controlling and influencing.[25]

Clearly, critical theory critiques instrumental rationality. Yet, it does more than provide criticism. It also proposes a reflective, thoughtful (in the Heideggerian sense of "thinking as dwelling"[26]) orientation in a communicative rationality. Habermas suggest that a "fundamental conflict constitutive of late capitalism" is the "conflict between systems-rationality and communicative rationality."[27] This *communicative rationality* is oriented toward reaching an understanding (and ultimately a consensus) and can lead to social emancipation as

> a process of freeing communication both from its unreflective reliance on tradition (traditional worldviews, customs) and its being overpowered by the untrammeled and therefore irrational growth of instrumental rationalization.[28]

Such communication affirms the rational basis for understanding, engaging people in discussion free from domination and in "arguments" in which "there must be the freedom to move from a given level of discourse to increasingly reflective levels."[29] This process appears similar to Freire's critical pedagogy which also involves critical reflection and practical discourse about norms and values as well as about means and ends. In these ways, shared meanings may be generated through social interaction, contributing

to an increased communicative rationality and ultimately, to self-emancipation. Critical social theory provides a number of concepts that can be useful when critiquing the process of professionalization in adult education. In particular, critical theory raises some specific issues and questions to be addressed.

## Questions Raised by Critical Social Theory Concerning the Professionalization of Adult Education

The most fundamental question that critical social theory raises is: "Is professionalization a desirable goal for adult education?" If so, then under which circumstances is professionalization desirable? For both questions, it is necessary to ask also who will decide about desirability. In attempting to answer the initial fundamental question, other questions also elicited by a critical perspective need to be addressed. Basic foundational questions such as "What should be the goals of adult education?" need to be asked and the answers contested. Because one of the strengths of critical theory is the historical critique it provides, adult education needs to be examined to discern why it is becoming so professionalized now. Having a deep understanding of both the social aims once pursued by adult education and the nature of adult education activity prior to professionalization enables consideration of the present state of adult education. How have the social goals and practices of adult education been affected by professionalization? Have they been "engineered" to satisfy the interests of professionalization, and have there been conflicts?

Reflection upon these issues, of course, encompasses the context of the total society and particularly the milieu in which adult education occurs. If adult education, for example, had once been more commonly available, more a part of the community, and had a stronger relationship to social change, then a critique should address the transformation. Considering the present context, one problem with the technological mode within society is that people become organized in ways that give the appearance that all is mastered, precluding the need for people to think about such arrangements. Adult education organizations and institutions often reflect this structural state, harbouring inherent barriers to considering broader social goals. The widely-divergent mandates of organizations providing adult education and the competition among such organizations for economic survival supersedes collaborative efforts toward even articulating a vision for society. Adult educators can experience colonization of their life-worlds by their own organizations and become dominated by them. Critical theory, however, demands that critical thought be separate from and applied to these organizations.

To the extent that professionalization would merely increase the technical competence of adult educators or, at its worst, would become concerned with "appearing to be doing something rather than with doing something"[30] without dealing with normative issues, that is with philosophical and ethical considerations, such efforts would be identified as symptomatic of instrumental rationality. The capacity for professionalization to increase practitioners' use of technological conceptions and methods to organize the world of adult education, thereby systematically ordering and controlling adults' learning experiences, will also determine whether professionalization might increasingly suppress criticalness.

Will a concern for professionalization lead to precise standardization, defining professional knowledge as only technical knowledge? Will the professional adult educator be socialized to lose his or her own "cultural grounds"[31] for the activity of helping adults learn, thus undermining cultural traditions and norms? Will professionalization lead to the exclusiveness of a specialized group of adult educators who will organize learning opportunities in an administrative system which removes and transforms adult education into a form which bears little resemblance to adult learning which is commonplace in the community?

If the professionalization of adult education would lead to a practice characterized by an increasingly technological instrumental rationality, then critical theory also raises the difficult challenges associated with establishing a more critical practice of adult education. This practice would encourage adult educators to create learning situations where critical reflection could occur among learners and facilitators free from the dominating effects of technological methodologies and unreflected, administratively-conceived goals. Critical reflection could be critical hermeneutical reflection in which the adults can situate themselves between their concern for the preservation of cultural traditions and for their emancipation from them[32] as they reflect upon how society could be other than it is, in a normative sense.

Yet, adult educators may argue that such a practice, while admirable in theory, is idealistic and not applicable to the general field of adult education. Education for social change does not tend to be funded within the mainstream organizations and institutions of adult education practice. Thus, such adult education occurs largely by voluntary groups, outside the boundaries of the formal adult education field. Easily mobilized to action, such groups often constitute the backbone of social movements.

Nevertheless, notwithstanding the organizational constraints of many adult education institutions, adult educators can seek ways to explore what it means to live in a society and also to critique it. While this implies risk, one step towards a more critical practice would be to make problematic the institutional and power arrangements that suppress the freedom of adult learners and educators (e.g. where efficiency and rationality have been the means of control). Habermas does not propose a specific program of change for institutions, but he does, as cited earlier, state that blockages have to be contested. This involves deliberations about the reasons blockages are regarded as such. Do people experience a lesser sense of self-determination, and do they feel treated more as objects as a result of present arrangements?

Another step to be taken is to integrate adult education into overall conceptions of social development and social change. In concrete terms, one way to begin (in a small-scale manner) would be to introduce relevant changes to courses offered through adult education institutions. For example, faculties of university extension offer various computer courses, emphasizing the technical skills necessary for proper operation of the machines. There could be, however, changes made so that learners and adult educators could reflect upon the effect that computers have upon society and social relations. In this small way, the beginning would be laid for considering that the technical way of knowing is only one way of knowing (which can gloss over aesthetic ways of knowing) and is not the ultimate way of knowing. Encouraging critical reflection upon the impact of technology shifts the emphasis from merely technical concerns to broader community concerns and social issues. Such an approach would reflect a broader conception of the goals of adult education than would an approach characterized by technological rationality.

To suggest that adult educators should proceed more carefully and thoughtfully in the process of professionalization may well be necessary advice. That the process of professionalization generally proceeds according to the trend of increasing instrumental rationality *is demonstrated* in another related helping profession—that of social work. What began as a movement for social reform in England became professionalized in accordance with the medical casework model. When the casework model, based upon the application of a technical social science to managing human problems, gained supremacy within the profession, any orientation with a questioning, critical stance (such as community organizing) became a marginal and less legitimized mode of intervention. If those in the field of adult education wish to affirm unequivocably that adult education ought to be emancipatory social practice, then it is essential that the potential challenges to such a mode be recognized and overcome. Examining the case history

of transformation of the field of social work from a movement to a profession may reveal the sources of controversy and struggle which were salient in contributing to the nature of practice which has emerged. That those in the field of adult education should examine the transformation which is occurring within the field is even more imperative, especially if they wish to participate actively in shaping its future.

## The Professionalization of Adult Education: A Reflection

Adult education in North America, which includes "all purposeful efforts by adults, or on behalf of adults, to promote learning—in all areas of human concern"[33] has taken place historically and continues to take place in both informal and formal settings. Learning has been and is currently facilitated by people having a wide range of backgrounds. During the social movement and advocacy thrusts of adult education in Canada, "social animators and adult educators"[34] have been the facilitators. It is noteworthy that the increasing concern with professional preparation and skills emerged when adult education programs sponsored by educational institutions (e.g. continuing education associated with community colleges and school boards) grew in number, requiring adult education personnel as "organisers and programme planners."[35] One may conclude that organizers and programme planners supplant social animators during times of increased activity towards professionalization. Accordingly, predictable steps have been taken (associations formed, journals published, research pursued, and university courses and degree programs instituted) toward attaining the status of a profession.

If the professionalization of adult education proceeds in accordance with the application of only scientific standards to its methods, materials and organization, then the field risks the danger of becoming rationalized. While the technical competence of practitioners may be increased, will this emphasis upon such training not also influence the thinking about the aims and activities of the field? Specifically, if the social movement thrust of adult education employs "means of adult education and its wider application in the community"[36] to improve the nature of society, then it would seem inevitable that the emphasis upon professional-technical competence would filter into the community. This would be the case, however, only when the emphasis upon this kind of competence prevails and the movement cannot create competing or better notions of competence. Perhaps the vision of what constitutes an improvement in the nature of society would acquire an overtone of technical improvement as a consequence of increasingly technically competent adult educators working in the community. Can it be otherwise that the professionalization of adult education, with an emphasis upon

improving technical competence, would have a definitive interactive effect upon the social movement trend? Indeed, it would appear that such professionalization of adult education cannot be considered to be a neutral trend which merely and temporarily shifts the focus of attention away from social movement concerns.

Looking to the future, the questions remain: should adult education continue to professionalize, and if so, what is the best way to proceed? Drawing from the insights provided by critical social theory, a careful approach is in order. We need to develop a critique of professionalization as it has occurred so far and examine the "trade-offs." We need to understand fully the nature of professionalized adult education and reflect upon how closely it represents a type of instrumental rationality. Do we find, as did the American adult educator Webster Cotton in the mid-60s, a "professional tradition" which focuses upon meeting individual needs? Does this professionalism have an accompanying "narrowing of vision in the field" in direct contrast to the "social reformist tradition"?[37]

If, however, we find, or can develop, a professionalism that upholds broader aims for adult education in society (including a social purpose), then perhaps social movement thrusts would not be so undermined. Such a professionalism needs to be rooted also in philosophical foundations, historical and cultural perspectives, and needs to promote reflection and action to empower adult learners. Indeed, in a subsequent article *The Adult Educator: Change Agent or Program Technician?* Selman raises the issues of having a vision of society as it should be, and taking action to attain that vision of a learning society. He asks adult educators to consider; "Is that part of our professional responsibilities?"[38] In answering this and other questions, we should struggle with what the goals of adult education ought to be, as well as with what it means to become professionalized.

## Reference Notes


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6. Paul A. Pross, "Pressure Groups: Adaptive Instruments of Political Communication," in *Pressure Group Behaviour in Canadian Politics*, ed. A.P. Pross (McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1975),16. See his discussion of the women's movement as an example of organizing around a common cause.
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