

SKIRTING THE ISSUES? A RESPONSE TO ANGELA MILES

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Abstract

This article offers a response to Angela Miles' "Women's Challenge to Adult Education" which appeared in the May 1989 issue of this journal. The article moves through a series of questions to an attempted reconstruction of the theoretical basis underlying Angela Miles' arguments. It then notes, that in light of recent exchanges between postmodernism and feminism, this theoretical basis can be called into question. It concludes with the suggestion that postmodernism modifies rather than denies the issue of women's challenge to adult education.

Résumé

Cet article est une réponse à Angela Miles qui a publié dans cette revue en mai 1989, sous le titre "Women's Challenge to Adult Education." Par une série de questions, l'auteure tente de reconstruire les bases théoriques sous-jacentes aux arguments de Miles. Elle note qu'à la lumière des échanges récents entre le postmodernisme et le féminisme, cette base théorique peut être remise en question. En conclusion, elle suggère que le postmodernisme modifie plutôt qu'il ne nie la question du défi que posent les femmes à l'éducation des adultes.

Angela Miles attempts a condensed and densely interwoven argument around the issue of "women's challenge" which is directed primarily toward two areas of concern to adult education: first, pedagogy, in particular learner-educator relationships; and second, the "social change" tradition. She attempts to draw together these two strands by suggesting that the historic association of adult education with social activism has made the field potentially more amenable to the critical educational ideals of social movements. In turn, these ideals include a more egalitarian approach to educator-learner relationships, for example in "recognizing learners as knowledge creators."¹¹

Cutting across and woven into her concern with the practice of adult education is Miles' exposition of the "uniqueness" of women's

challenge and she discusses this challenge in reference to four loosely connected areas:

- (1) the political significance of women claiming group membership and identifying their specific concerns, needs, and values;
- (2) the focus on gender as an analytic category which, if taken fully into account, would challenge adult education to question established (and artificially dichotomized) ways of thinking;
- (3) the development of "new epistemologies" which have arisen out of women's conscious reflection on and (re)naming of their experiences as women;
- (4) feminist practice (specifically that of the women's movement) which, she argues, realizes more fully the ideals and principles of critical education.²

The challenge to adult education, then, is to recognize and acknowledge the alternative insights, analyses and methods of the women's movement, in particular by the incorporation of "the female point of view", a challenge which covers politics, epistemology and political and educational practice.³

My critical response is difficult because I agree with much of what Angela Miles has to say. For example, it seems inevitable that sooner or later adult education and adult educators will have to come to terms with the number of women in the field (be they students or practitioners) if only because, given the present devaluation of the "feminine", the increased numbers of females in adult education will inevitably affect its reception both inside and outside the academy. I would also agree that among the things feminism has to offer adult education are its questioning of the universality and representativeness of the Western intellectual tradition, including much of the social and political theory that informs social movement thought and its elaboration of a variety of theories of gender. As Seyla Benhabib notes:

"Gender" is to feminist theory what "class" and "production" were to traditional Marxism and what "the unconscious" and "repression" are to psychoanalysis. Gender defines a problem horizon that sensitizes us to a certain kind of difference. To adopt gender as an analytical category means to focus on the social and cultural construction of sexual difference ... [which]

... serves in turn as a constitutive element of all social and political relationships.⁴

If adult education were to give greater credence to gender and gender issues it would effect at least a minimal broadening of its present horizons, making the field more inclusive.⁵

A third area in which we agree is that there is something the women's movement has to offer adult education, although I would not relate this to the practice of the women's movement to the same extent as does Angela Miles.

Several social theorists outside feminism agree that the women's movement is in some way unique. Brian Fay, for example, suggests not only that the women's movement provides a strong example for those who believe social change can occur in an educative fashion, but further notes that its greatest contribution is

... that it teaches the mistake ... of thinking that social revolutions must be conducted by a monolithic and homogeneous group, kept that way by a center which ensures that the 'correct' ideological line is followed.⁶

Similarly, the critical social theorist Jurgen Habermas points to the women's movement as the only one of the "new" social movements which, through political activism designed actively to appropriate new territory, retains links to historic liberation movements and to a universalist morality.⁷ At this point, however, some differences between Miles and myself have already begun to emerge and it should be obvious that these differences lie not so much in the *what* we emphasize as in the *why* we emphasize what we do. Briefly, I suspect our different feminisms offer different explanations and justifications which would affect our arguments as to why adult education *should* note women's challenge. It is to the question of these differences I will now proceed.

I will simply list rather than analyze the questions I have. The first of these questions is around the issue of women's challenge to adult education by virtue of numbers alone.⁸ This type of statement can only be made if women are substantially different from men, and in a position of sufficient influence for their differences to effect change. A second disagreement was with Miles' statement that when women

... teach women as women they are teaching members of their own group with a potentially closer relationship to the

learners, than is generally possible for educators/organizers/facilitators.⁹

Here, I was confused as to why the identity (or at least shared sex/gender) between educator and learner should make any necessary difference. I wondered if Miles would want to make a similar argument about men teaching men, which in turn led me to ask whether it was the issue of sex/gender identity between educator/learner that was important or whether it was which sex/gender one inhabited. In turn, I was partly drawn to think this way because I could not see how saying that people feel more comfortable with other people of the same sex — a possible "common sense" reading of the statement — was significant for her argument.

In addition to these two specific questions, I was also somewhat dubious about both the extent to which first and third world feminists have achieved "genuinely equal, reciprocal and supportive relationships" and how, precisely, the "articulation of a political ground for education" had enabled this.¹⁰ Given the extent of criticism of mainstream feminism by women of colour, I was again led to wonder if it was not so much the political ground as *who* inhabited it that was important for the argument.

These questions were made more pressing by the series of textual elisions or the conflation between the challenges of women, the challenge of feminism, and the challenge of the women's movement, all three of which are in turn modified by the term "unique." Not all women are feminists, not all feminists are part of a women's movement, and the women's movement itself is split into at least two factions (the more radical social change version that Angela Miles presents, and a neo-conservative feminist movement that still adheres to a more traditionalist conception of the family and of women's roles). I was again forced to ask what might make it possible to connect the three challenges.

A possible answer lies in what I take to be the basis of Miles' argument, the notion of women's experience. What makes the article problematic is that this notion is theorized insufficiently in the text for the connections it provides to be accessible easily to an audience not acquainted with feminist discourse. Now, as I see it, the approach to experience offered in the text veers somewhat between two perspectives: a *culturalist* approach which suggests that the basis for women's different and distinctive experience lies in sexual difference, and a *standpoint* approach which suggests that women's experience is socially constructed, although still different.¹¹

My reason for suggesting that there is a culturalist element to her argument is derived primarily from Miles' closing references to "the female point of view and experience."¹² To me, the term female suggests a sexual as much as a social division between men and women, although this is not the only interpretation.

On the whole, however, I would classify the overarching theoretical framework of Miles' article as more in tune with standpoint feminism. With this approach, to the extent that all women are subject to a sex/gender system which construes and represents them as feminine, they can then be said to be a class and share a common identity. In turn, to the extent that the socio-cultural transformation of sex (male and female) into gender (masculinity and femininity) asymmetrically assigns meaning, powers and properties to men and women, it can also be understood to be linked to the social organization of inequality, thus providing the impetus for many of the activities of the (social change) women's movement. The idea that, for whatever reason, women's experience is central to their forming a class allows Miles to talk interchangeably about women, feminism, and the women's movement. In something of a hermetic circle, women are seen as the subject and object of feminism and of the women's movement and, in turn, the latter is seen as derivative of women's experience.

I suspect that one of the main reasons this standpoint approach has been taken is because Miles sees it as vital to hold onto feminism as an emancipatory theory, one based in a critical theory of gender. In order to do this it is necessary to suggest that women can form a specific and defined political constituency. This argument necessitates focussing on what women hold in common. Unfortunately, there are some problems with this approach, problems which have been highlighted in the postmodern confrontation with the discourses of modernity, including emancipatory social and political discourses such as feminism. Without going into great detail it might be worth noting some aspects of this postmodern debate here, particularly as it relates to experience and identity.

Summed up very briefly, in contrast to humanist discourse which suggests a fairly static or essentialized view of humanity, postmodernism sees what it terms "the subject" as socially produced in language. Drawing on both Althusser's notion of interpellation and on a view of language common to structural and post-structural linguistics, postmodernism views the subject as "decentered." In contrast to humanism — and to the approach implicit in Angela Miles' argument — identity does not follow unproblematically from

experience. The decentering of the subject suggests that identity is in flux, historically mutable, and contradictory as it shifts with the variety of discourses that call people to identify with various subject positions.¹³

Another aspect to note about postmodernism is the idea that power functions by tying people to certain subject positions. Although people may choose to focus on any one of these, for example their gender, their lives cannot be reduced to any one category. As both subject to and subject of discourses, human activity is structured by and (re)produces multiple sets of power relationships.¹⁴

The implications of this postmodernist type of approach for arguments such as Miles' should be apparent: given that gender is always cut across by other discourses (say of race or class) are not the differences amongst women at least as significant as the differences between men and women? Is it therefore possible to suggest an unproblematic relation between experience of gender and women's identity as women which will then serve as the basis for a political movement? As Delmar notes:

The employment of psychoanalysis and critical theory to question the unity of the subject, to emphasize the fragmented subject, is potentially subversive of any view which asserts a 'central' organizing principle ... To deconstruct the subject 'woman,' to question whether 'woman' is a coherent identity is also to imply the question of whether 'woman' is a coherent political identity, and therefore whether women can unite politically, culturally, and socially as 'women' for other than very specific reasons. It raises questions about the feminist project at a very fundamental level.¹⁵

If there is no such thing as 'woman,' how can there be such as thing as women's challenge to adult education? If women's experience is split, fractured, what about it is sufficiently common to all women to such an extent that Angela Miles can talk about the unique challenge of women, of feminism and of the women's movement?

While postmodern critique obviously renders more complex the relations between identity and experience, the insights it affords are not totally negative. Even taking into account postmodern scepticism, there are areas where postmodern and other feminists can come to agreement. For example, the valorization of women's experience can be viewed as a tactical necessity not only because feminism and the women's movement seek something unique on which to base their claims, but also because the claim to identity

derived from experience is a radical gesture itself.¹⁶ Similarly, the notion of 'woman' provides a useful political category, even if it is one that in the end is found theoretically empty, as Julia Kristeva suggests.¹⁷ More than this, as the women's movement has struggled for control of means of interpretation and communication sufficient for social and political participation on a more equal basis, and to the extent it has during this struggle reinterpreted needs and constituted a revisioned vocabulary with which to express and contest those needs, then the women's movement can itself be said to be reconstituting 'women' in social and political discourse.¹⁸ These suggestions modify, but do not in the end detract from women's challenge to adult education: adult education will have to come to terms with women, with feminism and with the insights from the women's movement. But this will mean that it has to come to terms with the historically mutable and changing forms of all three as they engage in redefining 'woman.'

Reference Notes

1. Angela Miles, "Women's Challenge to Adult Education," *Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education* 3 (May 1989):3.
2. *Ibid.*, 3-5.
3. *Ibid.*, 7.
4. Seyla Benhabib, "On Contemporary Feminist Theory," *Dissent* 36 (3):367-78.
5. This point is also raised by Angela Miles.
6. Brian Fay, *Critical Social Science* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 115.
7. Nancy Fraser, "What's Critical About Critical Theory?: The Case of Habermas and Gender," in *Feminism as Critique*, ed. S. Benhabib and D. Cornell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 49.
8. Miles, "Women's Challenge to Adult Education," 1.
9. *Ibid.*, 3-4.
10. *Ibid.*, 6.
11. I realize that this is a gross oversimplification of the positions involved.
12. Miles, "Women's Challenge to Adult Education," 11.
13. C. Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). See also Susan Collard and M. Law, "Universal Abandon: Postmodernity, Politics and Adult Education," *Proceedings of the 1990 Adult Education Research Conference* (forthcoming).
14. This discussion is drawn mostly from the work of Michel Foucault, rather than from other authors generally considered postmodern. See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction I* (New York: Vintage Books) and Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry* 8 (Summer 1982) 777-795.
15. Rosalind Delmar, "What Is Feminism?," in *What is Feminism: A Re-Examination*, ed. J. Mitchell and A. Oakley (New York: Pantheon Books) 10.

16. This point is also made by Angela Miles.

17. J. Kristeva, "Woman Can Never Be Defined," in *New French Feminisms*, ed. E. Marks and I. deCourtivron (New York: Schocken Books) 137.

18. This discussion is drawn mostly from the work of Nancy Fraser. See "What's Critical About Critical Theory?", 53 and Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989) 172.