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Tensions Between Practice and Praxis in Academia:
Adult Education, Neoliberalism, Professional
Training, and Militarism

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TENSIONS BETWEEN PRACTICE AND PRAXIS IN ACADEMIA: ADULT EDUCATION, NEOLIBERALISM, PROFESSIONAL TRAINING, AND MILITARISM

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Abstract

In education, there is a tension between exploring practice (focusing on the practicalities of an educator's daily work) and critical praxis (problematizing positionality as it relates to pedagogies and engaging in a societal critique). I do not set this up as a duality, a dichotomy, or a continuum, but as a skewed Venn diagram, in which there is a pull between foci as a result of educational paradigms and intersecting forces such as neoliberalism, corporatism, commodification of learning, and even militarism. These pressures have fueled an emphasis on practice and measurement, frequently at the expense of exploration and analysis, with particular implications for the field of adult education. In this article I build on my own experiences as an advocate of adult education to explore how education and learning are often framed in faculties of education and post-secondary institutions; the challenges and opportunities of merging adult education (and graduate and undergraduate courses) with other programs in faculties of education; and the educational and societal implications of these framings and changes.

Résumé

Je remarque qu'en éducation il y a un conflit entre l'application de la pratique (se concentrer sur les valeurs concrètes du programme quotidien d'un éducateur) et la praxie critique (problématiser le positionnement dans le contexte des pédagogies et s'engager dans une critique sociale). Ce constat ne doit pas s'interpréter comme une dualité, une dichotomie ou un continuum, mais plutôt comme un diagramme de Venn asymétrique où il y a une action de traction entre les objectifs ressortissant des paradigmes éducationnels et le croisement de forces externes, telles que le néolibéralisme, le corporatisme, la marchandisation de l'apprentissage et même le militarisme. Ces éléments ont encouragé l'application de la pratique et des mesures, bien souvent au détriment de l'exploration et de l'analyse, affectant plus particulièrement le champ de l'andragogie. Par cette étude et basé sur mes propres expériences en tant qu'intervenante dans le domaine de l'éducation des adultes, je cherche à discerner la nature de l'encadrement de l'éducation et de l'apprentissage dans les facultés universitaires et institutions post secondaires; à identifier les défis et les possibilités d'amalgamer l'éducation des adultes (et cours de niveau supérieur ou

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conduisant à un premier diplôme) avec d'autres programmes offerts dans les facultés d'éducation; et enfin, d'explorer les conséquences éducationnelles et sociétales de cet encadrement et des changements encourus.

Introduction

Moving from a university with its own master's degree in adult education/lifelong learning to one with a degree/certificate program at the undergraduate level but none at the master's was an interesting experience for me. Often, adult education programs are marginalized in education faculties (Nesbit, 2013); even with strong faculty, students, and scholarship, they can be eclipsed by professional training and study for teachers. While, on one hand, I was excited about an adult education undergraduate program that, to me, signalled the importance of engaging in an exploration of learning throughout the lifespan in contexts not restricted to formal education, I was also apprehensive about the lack of a program at the graduate level.¹ Although there were several master's courses in adult education, they were separated into different programmatic streams, giving the impression that adult education scholarship was viewed as good for electives but not important enough for its own field of study. Over the years it has also become apparent to me that, at the undergraduate level, in both adult education and concurrent education contexts, there is a strong expectation that the degree focus on classroom application.

There is a tension between exploring practice (focusing on the practicalities of an educator's daily work) and critical praxis (problematizing positionality as it relates to pedagogies and engaging in a societal critique). I do not set this up as a duality, a dichotomy, or a continuum, but as a skewed Venn diagram (see Figure 1), in which there is a pull between foci as a result of educational paradigms and intersecting forces such as neoliberalism, corporatism, managerialism, commodification of learning (i.e., Luxton & Mossman, 2012; Reimer, 2004; Ritzer, 2002), and even militarism (Apple, 2006; Giroux, 2011; Taber, in press). Some educators work in the left-hand side, some in the right, and many in the overlap, with varying emphases on practice, critical praxis, and postmodern deconstruction.

These delineations can be aligned with Habermasian paradigms, as described by Plumb and Welton (2001). For instance, technical instrumentalism would fit into the left-hand area, with a focus on practical application; this leads into humanism and emancipation in the centre, with a focus on critical praxis.² Emancipation then could be extended into the right-hand side, with an aim to deconstruct and problematize the ways in which people

1 In contrast to the ways in which most university programs are structured – with undergraduate degrees established before graduate degrees are developed – most adult education programs in Canada exist at the graduate level only.

2 I am using the term *critical praxis* as a catch-all for theoretical stances that argue for the interplay of theory and practice in ways that critique societal marginalization and work for social justice (i.e., Freire's [2000] and hooks' [1994] notions of praxis and critical thinking). As scholars in this area have a variety of foci (such as race, gender, heteronormativity, class, ability), I use critical praxis as a way to encompass many approaches. I acknowledge the problems that can arise in using such a term (for instance, critical theorists do not necessarily address feminism, feminists do not necessarily address race ...), but find that, for the purposes of this article, it best encapsulates my overall intent.

Figure 1: *Practical Application Overtaking Critique*



think about societal issues. As an example, Butler's (1999) work on gender has been critiqued for being too deconstructionist (and therefore irrelevant to people's lives), but it certainly can be (and has been) used to engage in a societal critique of gender that complicates how gender is perceived and experienced (see Paechter, 2003; Taber, 2011b; Taber, 2013), thus assisting educators and researchers in working for change.

Although most faculty would agree that there is a need to work somewhere in the centre, there is much disagreement not only on how to combine the three, but on how critical praxis itself is taken up. Too often there is insufficient critique of the ways in which intersecting oppressions operate with respect to power and privilege. At the institutional level there is increasing pressure to work only in the circle of practice, with a focus on employability and accountability, which is reflected in students' expectations for their learning and its outcome. These pressures have fueled an emphasis on practice and measurement, frequently at the expense of exploration and analysis.

So where does this leave adult education, a field that, in Canada in particular, prides itself on critical inquiry and societal critique? In this article I build on my own experiences as an advocate of adult education to explore how education and learning are often framed in faculties of education and post-secondary institutions; the challenges and opportunities of merging adult education (and graduate and undergraduate courses) with other programs in faculties of education; and the educational and societal implications of these framings and changes.

Approaches to Education and Learning in Universities

I have often pondered the irony that Canadian adult education, as a field that is generally marginalized, works on behalf of and with groups that are marginalized. Certainly adult educators are not oppressed, but they do typically work in the margins of education and society (Nesbit, 2013). Historically, the Western approach to schooling is relatively new (Robinson, 2001). Until industrialization the learning that was valued was squarely in the field of adult education/lifelong learning: learning in community, in the home, on farms, in apprentice groups, in resistance, and so on. This learning was largely unregulated, communal,

and aimed for subsistence as opposed to profit above all else (Welton, 2013). I do not claim that the learning was ideal and in the best interests of all, but that it was very different from valued education today, which is too often based on standardization, accountability, and employability, with students typically treated as clay to be moulded to market needs in the K–12 system (Giroux, 2009; Robinson, 2001) or as consumers in the post-secondary context (Brule, 2004; Ritzer, 2002; Servage, 2009). There are, of course, exceptions due to the ways in which some educators and students engage in educational and societal critique, but as a whole the system works to reproduce the status quo of schooling (Giroux, 2009).

Therefore, adult education is often marginalized for its focus outside formal education as well as its foundation of critical inquiry. It is more than common for those not familiar with the field to assume adult education is simply about tutoring adults with difficulties in literacy (narrowly defined as understanding numbers and words), helping adults obtain their high-school equivalency diplomas, and engaging in program planning and instruction for workplace training (Nesbit, 2013). For example, in my experience over the last several years, one education professor told a PhD student that he should not have been accepted because his research did not centre on the K–12 context. Another discredited a colleague’s presentation on workplace learning because it did not describe program planning; it critiqued a gendered culture. Yet another asked why a course on learning gender in specific contexts was in an education department as opposed to one in Canadian studies or political science.

Furthermore, education departments/faculties are typically given a “professional studies” designation, either formally or in the perception of others (as well as many education faculty members themselves). For university administrators, the direct link of education programs to employment and career advancement is a positive, ensuring a constant crop of new students even as there are ever-decreasing teacher positions due to cutbacks in the public education system and increasing class sizes. This connection to the workplace figures well into universities’ overall orientation toward learning for earning and association with industry (Newson, 2012; Ritzer, 2002), changing the ways in which education and learning are approached (Brule, 2004; Hornosty, 2004; Hyslop-Margison & Leonard, 2012; Servage, 2009; Thornton, 2012). For instance, faculty members are encouraged to engage in entrepreneurship and commercialization in their research (Hornosty) to counteract budget rescission and decreased funding. Teaching models are concomitantly changing, with pressure to move courses online (Alexander, 2004) and increase part-time, untenured instructors (Paul, 2004; Webber, 2008). Feminist and critical teaching approaches and content are resisted at best and maligned at worst (Apple, 2006; Burghardt & Colbeck, 2005; Hobbs & Rice, 2011; Holloway & Gouthro, 2011; Simpson, 2010; Taber, 2011a; Webber, 2005, 2006). Programs that do not have an immediate connection to employment – those viewed as being too political – are being threatened (Hobbs & Rice; Hyslop-Margison & Leonard).

The practice-profit focus reflects a basic difference in ideological understandings of the purpose of a university education. In Ontario, a debate is raging between the government of Ontario (as represented by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario [HEQCO] and the *Commission on the Reform of Ontario’s Public Services* (Drummond, 2012), supported by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, on the one side, and the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) and the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations on the other. The first side calls for decreasing expenditures,

differentiating universities, and focusing on employment and accountability to attract students, increase skills, and measure outcomes (see HEQCO, 2013, for numerous examples, as well as Drummond, 2012, Chapter 7), while the second emphasizes the importance of academic freedom, pedagogy, and scholarship (see CAUT, 2013a). Additionally, the provincial government recently passed two bills intended to decrease the power of unions with particular implications for education: Bill 92 (2012), legislation that called for wage freezes for all public sector bargaining units, and Bill 115 (2012), legislation limiting K–12 teachers' right to strike. Both bills were protested, with the former proving to have little effect on collective agreements and the latter repealed once a contract was forced on the teachers. The use of this legislation demonstrates the government's aim to control educators, leading to a fear that similar legislation may be used in other educational/organizational contexts. Additionally, Tim Hudak, the Ontario Progressive Conservative leader, has been campaigning on a "right-to-work" platform, an inaptly named plan that would weaken unions by making member dues voluntary (Kahnert, 2013). Unions and educators have been put on notice that the government will be increasingly aggressive in setting neoliberal terms of work and learning.

Adult Education in Faculties of Education

It is within this larger context that I explore adult education's programmatic positionality within faculties of education. Many faculties are quite complex, delivering consecutive BEd degrees (one- or two-year programs taken after students obtain a bachelor's degree) and/or concurrent BEd degrees (resulting in a four-year undergraduate degree as well as a one-year BEd), as well as graduate degrees. MEd and PhD students include practising K–12 teachers, newly graduated K–12 teachers who decide to move straight into graduate study (often while searching for full-time work), and educators from other demographics such as post-secondary institutions, workplaces, health care, government, and advocacy groups (i.e., adult education). Some also deliver adult education degrees and diplomas. The ways in which the faculties are set up with regard to departments, centres, and programs can be equally complex. In my experience it can be relatively easy for faculty members who teach in adult education programs to stay sequestered and protect the program's interests. Conflicts still often arise over resources and ideology, but the existence of a defined program with academic oversight (such as a program chair) can work to mitigate these. However, in a faculty without a defined adult education program, let alone its own chair, the field can get lost. There is still an overriding belief that education occurs in classrooms, in K–12 contexts, despite the fact that a growing number of students are not schoolteachers.

As is often the case with any program, students take some electives based on scheduling, not content, resulting in opportunities to introduce those unfamiliar with adult education to the field when they take adult education courses. For faculty members – those who specialize in adult education but also teach other courses at the undergraduate and graduate level – there is also the opportunity to include content on adult education, linking learning in various contexts and at various points in life. This can help students broaden their understandings of education and learning, perhaps peaking interest in exploring other ways of learning and increasing awareness of the field. It can also be frustrating if students and others resist viewing adult education as a legitimate field of study.

To demonstrate my argument, I offer three separate examples from my own experience based on the ways in which tensions in undergraduate, concurrent, and graduate education intersect with institutional ones regarding profit, practice, and critical thought. I begin this section with a general critique of neoliberal commodification and move to one more specific to militarism. My aim here is not to *criticize* the contexts I discuss, but to *critique* the ways in which my experiences illustrate how a neoliberal, corporate approach to education is inundating faculties of education in general and adult education in particular.

For-Profit Teaching: Tensions in Undergraduate Education

During my involvement with an undergraduate adult education centre run on a for-profit facilitator-teaching model, prepackaged courses were typically written by a faculty member but taught entirely by facilitators (who have been described as falling on a scale somewhere between a teaching assistant and a part-time instructor and are remunerated as such). Although some facilitators had graduate degrees in adult education, many did not, and few had conducted research in the area. There was a tendency to privilege facilitators' practical experiences over academic credentials; the practice of adult education was viewed as more important than a scholarly exploration of the field. Certainly, students can learn much from practitioners; however, an increase in the use of contingent instructors contributes to a “casualization” of teaching that erodes faculty governance, academic freedom (Dobbie & Robinson, 2008), and, in many cases, scholarly inquiry. Furthermore, it was my experience that decisions in the program tended to be made based on budgetary considerations as opposed to pedagogical or scholarly ones.

As one example among many, I was once told that it was preferred that I did not teach in the program as it cost more to allocate my teaching to the centre than it did to hire a facilitator. So although the presence of an undergraduate program can be considered an indication that adult education is an important field worthy of study at all levels of education, it also, in this case, can devalue adult education due to a focus on practice and profit. In other words, it was too far left in Figure 1 for my comfort. While, arguably, decisions were made on what was perceived as best for the program and the students, this example demonstrates that the purpose of education was likely viewed from an entrepreneurial (Servage, 2009), neoliberal (Hyslop-Margison & Leonard, 2012), practical perspective. Many universities are exploring how they can use online learning to increase student enrollment and decrease faculty complement (Orwin, 2012), which may concomitantly herald the split between teaching faculty and institutions and research ones (Daniel, 2012).

Diversity and Schooling: Tensions in Concurrent Education

I further struggled with expectations that practice be valued over critical thought when teaching an undergraduate course on diversity issues in schooling in a concurrent education program. In this course, which I have taught several times, most of the students are in their fourth year of an undergraduate degree and getting ready to move into their fifth year in which they will begin their BEd professional training based on requirements from the Ontario College of Teachers. Often students are expecting a methods-type course in which they learn how to deal with diversity, as if diversity itself were the problem. I begin my first class addressing these misconceptions, discussing my approach to the course by explaining that it is not about “seven easy steps to deal with diversity” in a reductionist practical way,

with simple answers and straight-forward strategies, but is about an exploration of power and privilege related to the institution of schooling in society. Education, I argue, goes beyond the bricks and mortar of the K–12 system, as it is connected to learning in the homeplace, the community, the workplace, and popular culture, to name a few examples. Furthermore, I ask students to examine their own societal privilege, integrating their positionality with course content. As Holloway and Gouthro (2011) discuss, this can be very difficult for students/teacher candidates to do, particularly when they are concerned with surviving in the classroom, meeting curriculum requirements, and teaching subject matter. Add to this an institutional focus on practice, employability, and outcomes (for examples with respect to universities in general, see Luxton & Mossman, 2012; Reimer, 2004; and Ritzer, 2002), and it can be difficult to argue for critical praxis.

On one set of course evaluations I received, several students commented that someone who did not have K–12 experience should not be teaching in an education program, demonstrating that, despite my best efforts, they still viewed schooling from an applied, practical, formal education focus as opposed to a critical, analytic, lifelong learning one³. The concurrent program as a whole frequently demonstrates these tensions between education as a competency-based profession and educational studies as a critical exploration.

Education and Militarism: Tensions in Graduate Education

Finally, I am teaching, conducting research, and engaging in service in an increasingly militarized context. Arguably, all educators are, as indicated by Giroux's (2011) discussion of the "military–industrial–academic complex"; however, my university is even more clearly demonstrating a masculinist militarized approach through celebrations of its military namesake and the War of 1812 (Taber, in press). While it is uncomfortable to critique one's own institution, it is crucial to do so to work against neoliberal, militaristic discourses that privilege competition, othering, and profit over critical analysis. While I bring this critique into my work with undergraduates, it is at the graduate level in a course on war, gender, and learning that I have the space to deeply explore these concepts with students.

Administration as well as students and faculty have demonstrated pride and amusement in emphasizing military representations and events on campus, even when the university itself has no specific military heritage. This military focus is arguably intended to increase the university's visibility to *recruit* students and donors by tapping into societal discourses of militarism and patriotism; the institutional privileging of military values is interconnected with that in Canadian society as a whole, wherein there is a "common tendency to glorify war and pillory those who cast doubt on that glory" (McKay & Swift, 2012, p. 189).

As I frame my scholarship from a feminist antimilitarist (Enloe, 2000, 2007, 2010) learning lens (Taber, 2009), my work in the field of adult education directly confronts the ways in which administrators are representing and marketing the university, a tension I explore in my research and teaching. Briefly, feminist antimilitarism explores the gendered ways in which violence, hierarchy, and obedience are valued in a neoliberal support of capitalism. Students respond in differing ways to this content. Some students resist it, experiencing difficulties in problematizing discourses of patriotism and democracy related

3 Of note, our department is now exploring the possibility of developing an undergraduate course(s) that focuses on lifelong learning/adult education.

to education, but nonetheless beginning an exploration of these issues. Others become engaged in searching out examples of interconnections between militarism and education; one undergraduate student invited me to a local War Resisters event, and a group of graduate students worked with me to publish an article on educational representations of Remembrance Day (Fournier et al., 2012). A straightforward focus on formal education, practice, and professional training would reduce such opportunities to connect learning with society, decreasing the likelihood of engaging in critical praxis.

Implications

For me, a critical approach is synonymous with an adult education one. It is (should be!) impossible to discuss education without engaging in a societal critique of learning in a multitude of contexts. Educators need to work to expand the circle in the middle of Figure 1 so it is no longer secondary to practice nor excluded and marginalized. It is necessary to use critical inquiry in a societal critique based on critical praxis to work against a practice-based approach influenced by neoliberalism, commodification, corporatism, and militarism.

CAUT's Get Science Right campaign is contesting the ways in which Canadian research funding has been redirected to market needs. For instance, base funding for research has decreased while "100% of all new funding for Canada's three granting councils in the 2013 federal budget [is] dedicated to **research partnerships with industry**" (CAUT, 2013b, emphasis in original). A growing number of Canadian scholars are critiquing these changes, publishing about the need to critique a neoliberal, entrepreneurial approach to education (Hyslop-Margison & Leonard, 2012; Servage, 2009) and even protesting on Parliament Hill in Ottawa, the nation's capital (Linnitt, 2013). Adult education as a field, particularly in Canada, is also concerned about the ways in which professional training catered to the needs of industry is overtaking critical inquiry, as evidenced by this Special Issue. So while the forces of neoliberalism, corporatism, and managerialism are apparently being embraced by many government leaders and university administrators, they are also being contested by scholars concerned with social justice.

Additionally, militarism is becoming ever more connected to education (Apple, 2006, Giroux, 2011), even in Canada (Taber, in press). In a final example that connects my critique of neoliberalism to militarism, Brock University recently announced to the local news media (Rosts, 2013) and on its website (Brock University, 2013a) that a \$1 million donation had been made to create and erect a bronze sculpture of its namesake, Sir General Isaac Brock, on campus. When interviewed, "Lightstone [the university president] said the iconic sculpture will exude a sense of strength and tradition, reflecting Sir Isaac Brock's values and inspiration" (Rosts, p. 16). Although the 15-foot sculpture will show Brock in a "more academic-type prose – in conversation with books surrounding him," his sword is still prominent and the links to the War of 1812 are clear, with Lightstone describing him as "a man who truly helped situate society in Upper Canada" (p. 16). The donor, David S. Howes (whose identity was initially kept secret when the project was first announced; see Herod, 2011), stated that the sculpture "reflects the spirit of the students, staff and faculty" (p. 16) of the university. This raises the question of who gets to define their own spirit and values? Are they best exemplified by a connection to a military namesake, firmly drawing militarist discourses between the past and present (Taber, in press)?

At the same time, the university president wrote in his recent report to senate (Lightstone, 2013a) that, due to government cutbacks, “we must make decisions about what we will do more of, less of, or not at all” (p. 4), intimating that some programs that are not making money may be cut. In “a letter to the Brock community” posted on the university website, he specifically stated that there is a need to engage in a program review that will “identify where we need to further invest in and expand, where we need to stay the course and where we need to cease our activities or engage in major redesign” (Lightstone, 2013b). Other universities are experiencing similar attacks on disciplines deemed too expensive or dispensable, such as women’s studies (Bondy, 2011) and liberal arts (Hyslop-Margison & Leonard, 2012), and program prioritization reviews are occurring at several other Canadian universities. It is not known yet which disciplines may be cut at Brock, but the recent emphasis on profit, entrepreneurship, and employability is troubling, as is, in a time of cost-cutting measures, a million-dollar donation for a military sculpture.

When attending my faculty’s recent convocation ceremony, I took special note of the beginning of the conferring of degrees. The president asks graduands to “acknowledge this expectation” that “you will promote the interests and welfare of your university” (Brock University, 2013b, p. 13). If the university (in ways similar to other Canadian universities) is promoting neoliberalism, wherein a sculpture is more important than academic programs, where “spirit” and a connection to military history are required to align with institutional needs, then what are the implications of graduands making such an acknowledgment? Clearly not everyone subscribes to such neoliberal militaristic discourses, as evidenced by the Faculty of Graduate Studies’ choice of winner for the Spirit of Brock medal, a Muslim woman conducting research about the experiences of girls wearing the hijab in relatively monocultural schools. Whether the irony of this choice was apparent to the adjudicators, it demonstrates the ways in which, despite difficulties, educators can continue to engage in a societal critique that refuses to reduce learning to the economy and identity to that of a white European man.

In this article I have touched on the various ways in which my own institutional and provincial context are connected to national and societal developments with respect to education. Although some of the examples I give are unique to my context of a university that is increasingly promoting its military namesake, they are inextricably connected to larger forces of neoliberalism, corporatism, and the commodification of learning. Adult educators often work in complex environments, balancing professional training with a critical praxis that focuses on a societal critique. While it could be argued that adult education is a marginalized field within faculties of education, many of its scholars are in privileged positions as tenured academics. It is therefore crucial that adult educators continue to argue for the importance of the field generally and its societal critique specifically. This entails not only engaging in scholarly work through publications and presentations, but engaging in advocacy work that contests neoliberal policies at institutional and societal levels. Practice and professional training should not be privileged over critical praxis.

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