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But You're Not a Teacher: Bridging the Divide
Between Adult and Teacher Education

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Perspective

BUT YOU'RE NOT A TEACHER: BRIDGING THE DIVIDE BETWEEN ADULT AND TEACHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

In this autobiographical essay I discuss my role as an adult educator teaching in a teacher education program. I begin with an outline of my serendipitous pathway into the field of adult education, noting some moments in that journey that continue to inform my orientation to adult and lifelong learning. I then offer some reflections of my experiences teaching courses in a teacher education program, including moments of connection as well as disconnection.

Résumé

Dans cet essai autobiographique, je discute de mon rôle d'éducateur adulte enseignant dans un programme de formation des enseignants. Je commence par un aperçu de mon parcours fortuit dans le domaine de l'éducation des adultes, en relevant certains moments dans ce voyage qui façonnent mon orientation vers l'apprentissage aux adultes et l'apprentissage continu. Je présente ensuite quelques réflexions sur mes expériences d'enseignement dans ce programme de formation des enseignants, en particulier certains moments de connexion et d'autres de déconnexion.

Introduction

In this autobiographical essay I outline some key dimensions of my approach to teaching in a teacher education program. I begin with a narrative of my serendipitous pathway into adult education and then share my initial stumbles in trying to connect with teacher education candidates. I conclude with a discussion of the bridges of understanding that help build connections across our two worlds of education. Central to that work is a desire to move away from vertical or hierarchical systems toward more horizontal engagements in which multiple perspectives and locations are valued equally.

Career Beginnings

Like many other adult educators, my journey to adult education was not a direct or planned one. After high school I enrolled in a three-year hospital-based nursing training program.1 We all lived in residence together and were on the wards from the beginning. In many respects, we grew up together and, as a result of such shared experiences, developed strong bonds of friendship. As Chairs, McDonald, Shroyer, Urbanski, and Vertin (2002) have noted, "A successful cohort is a group of people who work together, provide assistance to each other, find success in their efforts, and simultaneously develop each individual's talents" (p. 2).

After graduation I worked for several years as a hospital-based nurse. During and following my training I became increasingly uncomfortable with the knowledge hierarchies that organized health care: medical doctors' knowledge was considered superior to nurses' practical knowledge; nurses' knowledge was considered superior to that of other health care workers; health care workers' knowledge was thought of as better than patients' and their families' understandings; and so on. It made more sense to me that everyone involved with care should be included in a partnership model. I found an opportunity to bring this approach to my practice when, for several months, I took over the duties of the patient education nurse who was responsible, among other things, for helping patients with newly diagnosed chronic health conditions. In that job many of my daily encounters involved helping adults to learn. Experimenting with various approaches through trial and error, I found that one principle seemed central to effective teaching and learning – that is, meeting people where they are at and recognizing and building on their knowledge. Later on I would learn that this partnership model was a familiar orientation in adult education.

Enjoying the focus on learning and working with adults, I sought out other similar positions and learned that these jobs required an undergraduate degree. I applied and entered the third year of a four-year nursing degree program.2 I was part of a small group of returning registered nurses, and we formed a strong bond as we negotiated our way through the nursing program and the wider system of academia. Here again I found that the support of a cohort proved essential to my survival in an education system that was a very different place of learning compared with hospital-based training. I came to appreciate that my nursing training was a three-year apprenticeship and continue to believe that the best support for adult learning is a combination of classroom-based and experiential learning (see Kolb, 1984). As a mature student I was both excited and frustrated by university. Here again I encountered powerful hierarchies. Within the nursing program, hospital training was regarded as an inferior form of education compared with university education; throughout all my courses, including electives in various social sciences, theoretical knowledge was considered superior to practical knowledge.

After completing my degree I worked for several years as a community health nurse. This was a fantastic, but very demanding, job in which my responsibilities extended from "birth to death." My duties included providing immunizations, health screening, and health education, including sex education to three schools. Through those school connections, my

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1   At that time, hospital-based programs were the only avenue for nursing training.
2   Two years of credit were given to those nurses who, like me, were already registered nurses.

appreciation for teachers grew. I also saw how schools were important places for building a sense of community. My community nursing also involved home visits to different individuals in my district: new mothers and their babies, families of children from the three schools where I worked, newly arrived immigrants and refugees from Vietnam who had moved into a housing complex, and the elderly who lived in a seniors' home. I also ran a new mom's drop-in at a local community centre and, in the evenings, taught prenatal classes.

Community health nursing has changed significantly since then, and community health nurses' duties are no longer so widely dispersed. Through that work I began to develop a deeper appreciation of community-based practice, what contributed to a sense of community, and the role that lifelong and lifewide learning played in community development. After almost 15 years of working as a nurse in both hospital and community health settings, I began to consider a different career outside the health system. After doing some travelling, I returned to Canada and sought assistance from a women's centre that provided life and career planning. Intrigued with this centre, I began to volunteer. While there I completed a peer-counselling diploma. I also designed and facilitated various health-related workshops for women. I felt I was getting closer to finding a new career that suited my passions (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987).

The challenges faced by women who came to that centre were many, and my attention to hierarchies of power sharpened. Although peer counselling was rewarding, I found the most enjoyment in planning and running various workshops. Recognizing my skill and knowledge limitations in that area, I enrolled in an introductory adult education course. Here I found a name and a professional identity (Steiner, 2013) and a field that valued the diverse contexts of learning with which I had been involved: worksites, universities, schools, homes, housing complexes, community centres, and feminist activism.

Hooked on adult education, I decided to enter a master of arts (MA) program. I was incredibly fortunate that the very first course I took was with Paulo Freire; he was a visiting scholar at the University of British Columbia in the summer of 1984. Through his class discussions and by studying his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), the source of my frustrations with hierarchies of knowledge became clearer; I also began to develop a deeper understanding of what supported women's learning. I noted that, while class was central to his considerations, gender was not a concept he attended to in his explorations of inequality. Feminist theorists like bell hooks (1994) were asking similar questions (see Holland, Blair, & Sheldon, 1995). I recall that he was always welcoming of these challenges and thoughtful in his response.

During that time I continued to be very involved with several women's organizations.[3] My activism was running parallel to the growing attention to critical theory and discussions in our courses about "emancipatory education." While this approach seemed to align with the social justice agenda of feminists, I noted that little attention was given to the significant learning taking place in North American women's movements. That question became the

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3   I served as a board member of the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CCLOW), an organization that grew out of the women's committee of the Canadian Association for Adult Education.

starting point for my MA thesis – a comparative analysis of feminist consciousness-raising processes and Freire's ideas of conscientization (Butterwick, 1987).

Through my MA studies I had encountered a new horizon of knowledge and understanding but still felt hungry to learn more, so I entered a doctoral program. My engagement with feminist organizations continued, as did my study of feminist and critical adult theory.[4] Government-funded re-entry programs, which are important sites of women's learning, became the focus of my doctoral research (Butterwick 1993). Feminist pedagogy (e.g., Ellsworth, 1989), feminist theories of the state (e.g., MacKinnon, 1989), and theories of the welfare state (Esping-Anderson, 1990), provided a powerful lens through which to explore a central paradox I had observed in these programs: Certain activities recognized and valued women`s existing skills and knowledge, but, in other ways, women's lives were devalued and misunderstood.

Two theorists in particular – Dorothy Smith and Nancy Fraser – provided a powerful lens for understanding the contradictions in these programs, and they continue to inform my research, teaching, and adult education practice. Smith's (1987) sociology *for* women, in which women are considered as *subjects* of their lives, not *objects* of someone else's inquiry, and her concept of "ruling relations" helped me to understand the empowering/disempowering dimensions of programs I was studying. How the everyday is organized by social and institutional power relations that extend beyond the everyday offers a framework with which to understand that all adult learning is situated in contexts where power is operating. Freire (1994) also spoke about the significance of the everyday and the importance of grounding oneself within the lived realities of subjects and the "knowledge of living experience" (p. 47).

Fraser's (1997) framework added further clarity to my study of women's re-entry programs, particularly her examination of "the politics of needs interpretation." Fraser pointed out how "needs talk" is at the heart of discussions of social welfare systems; it is also a key step in planning in adult learning. Determining learners' needs, however, is not a straightforward process, as "needs claims" often go uncontested. Fraser's feminist lens illuminates how the notion of needs is a deeply political process shaped by hierarchies of gender, race, and class. Her politicization of needs continues to inform my research and draws attention to how the needs of marginalized and disenfranchised groups and individuals are often predetermined by dominant groups; rarely do those on lower levels of knowledge hierarchies participate in these discussions.

These earlier experiences in nursing, in community-based health, within women's activist organizations, and with feminist theorizing have bearing on the approach I bring to teaching in teacher education programs. Below I discuss some of the ways these experiences and concepts have informed this work.

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4   Through my CCLOW connections I also became involved with the Women's Employment and Training Coalition, which focused on improving government policy and funding for women's employment training. These were exciting times for feminist groups as we had opportunities to engage with policy makers about the needs for quality training and access to living-wage employment for women.

Bridging the Adult Education and Teacher Education Divide

Most of my teaching responsibilities as a full-time faculty member in the adult education program are at the graduate level. I am also required to teach, from time to time, in the teacher education program. In the first few teacher education courses I taught, I was unclear about my role; I did work in schools for several years as a community health nurse, but had never been trained as a teacher, nor had I been a schoolteacher. I struggled to find a place. Teacher education students are hungry to learn how to do their jobs. Not surprisingly they wanted to hear from an experienced teacher about classroom management, given that they were responsible for creating optimum learning environments for 30 or more students, each with unique experiences and desires. Stronger and more meaningful connections became possible when I found a way to bridge my world of adult education with their world of educating children – and, particularly, when these connections were made from a social justice perspective.

Freire's ideas about education for freedom and the notion and practice of dialogue play a central role in my pedagogic approach, as does his problem-posing orientation. If I want to make a case for dialogic teaching, then I strive to ensure that dialogue and problem posing are what characterize our engagements. When starting a course I begin by posing the question, "What can you teach me and what can I learn from you and vice versa?" I invite students to introduce themselves by responding to the question, "What is important for me as your teacher in this class to know about you?" I also invite them to ask questions of me: "What do you need to know about me in order for you to learn?"

I clarify that, while I am not a schoolteacher, I am an adult educator. I talk about what that means and what I think I could contribute to their learning. Fundamental to bridge building between our two worlds is my belief that there are some shared principles in teaching children and teaching adults (see Rogers, 2003). Feminist theory has played an important role in helping me bridge our two worlds. For example, Smith's (1987) sociology for women, although a discussion about research approaches, highlights the importance of learners as subjects of their own lives, not objects of our teaching. Some might call this a learner- or learning-centred approach. Smith's ideas have also informed my discussions with teacher candidates about the paradoxes of teaching and schooling systems; that is, schools can be simultaneously empowering and disempowering. Part of that analysis involves recognizing whose interests are being served by particular arguments about the role of schools and teachers. Smith's notions also inform conversations about how schools and teachers' everyday worlds are suspended within social and institutional relations. Fraser's (1997) focus on the politics of needs talk has proven useful to our exploration of the debates about the role of education and teachers. There have been times when students are frustrated with the course content, and I invite them to collectively discuss their needs and then revise the course, including readings and assignments, to meet those needs. While initially startled by this option, most eagerly engage in this opportunity.

I suggest to teacher candidates that there are many ways and places, including adult education, where they can bring their passions for teaching. I share stories from my teaching in various contexts, including community health, emphasizing that people learn throughout their lifetime, that learning does not stop when formal education is complete. I pose this question: "If we understand that children learn throughout their lives, what is our role as teachers in preparing them for lifelong learning?" I also speak to the notion of

lifewide learning, highlighting how learning happens in many contexts of living our lives. I link this to the idea of schools being important institutions within communities, and I help them see the other places in community where children are learning – most particularly, the home.

The hierarchy of theory and practice often arises early in course work, usually through forms of resistance to theoretical readings. Here is a place for further problem-posing questions: "What is the relationship between practice and theory?" As a way to explore this question I invite them to consider the experiences they have already had of teaching. I assume all students have been teaching others, whether in a formal role or as a volunteer, or as something they do almost naturally in their family, with friends, and in their community. We explore what their practice is and what theories might be underpinning that practice. Students often suggest they are following no theory; a useful activity to help them appreciate that they do have theories (perhaps not formal theories) is to have them interview each other. Central to these conversations of theory and practice are explorations of missteps and mistakes. I share difficult situations and my failures as an educator, and I hope that this openness to exploring my own errors helps us become more reflective practitioners.

I often bring in arts-based activities to these classrooms, and there is sometimes resistance. We discuss how teaching children through play and creativity is a powerful way for them to learn, and I share my view that artful approaches are also useful for their learning as adults. One particularly creative process that students find generative is the creation, following their practicum, of short vignettes depicting difficult experiences they have had in schools. Students perform these scenes and, using Augusto Boal's (1979) notion of "rehearsal for action," we explore how those moments came into being and how they could be transformed.

The idea of partnerships that was of great interest in my nursing career is something I also bring to teacher education. Here again I pose a question: "How can teachers work with children's families, especially parents, as partners in their children's learning?" If they have been on practicum, we consider their encounters with parents during those placements. If students have children of school age, I invite them to write about what kind of partnership they would like to have with schools and teachers; if they have no children, I suggest they invite friends or relatives to share their experiences. I also invite guests to class who are teachers and can bring in this perspective.

I share my view that teacher education is all about adult learning and how that perspective informs my work. After we have considered some key principles of adult learning, such as those outlined previously, I ask, "What would an adult education view of teacher education programs look like?" Similarly, we talk about schools as sites of not only children's, but also adults' learning. I share my positive experiences of cohorts and the significant role they played in my learning, and we discuss the role and impact of cohort learning for them as adults and for children (Butterwick, Cockell, McArthur-Blair, & McIvor, 2012). Professional development of teachers, I suggest, is also a significant site of adult learning, and I ask them, "How might the notion of adult education and lifelong learning frame the provision of professional development for teachers?"

Teaching in the teacher education program is now something I look forward to. It is a context where my notions of education for freedom are tested and refined. While I acknowledge there are considerable differences between the two worlds of educating

children and educating adults, I believe that, as educators, we also share some fundamental principles. Both of our fields of study and practice can be enriched when we find a space to share our passions, misgivings, and successes.

Conclusion

In this reflective essay I began by mapping out my pathway into adult education and those experiences and resources I have acquired that continue to guide my work as an educator. My initial forays into the teacher education program were challenging, partly because I assumed that adult education and teacher education were two solitudes. When I shifted my perspective to regard teacher education and schools as sites of adult and community learning, a conversation began to take place and the borders between our fields of practice became more porous. I have found that working with teacher candidates as co-investigators and sharing with them what inspires and informs the project of education for freedom has opened new horizons of understanding.

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