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FEMINISM IN COMMUNITY: ADULT EDUCATION FOR TRANSFORMATION

Leona M. English and Catherine J. Irving. Sense Publishers, Rotterdam, Netherlands, 2015, 216 pages.

Feminism in Community provides a compelling argument for the reinvigoration of feminist thought in (adult) education. Through the use of current discussions and tensions in education, policy, and advocacy across the world, Leona English and Catherine Irving identify the need for women to come together in community to resist despotism. As English and Irving argue, “Learning about women’s oppression and the path towards social justice leads to new ways of understanding the issues” (p. 103). Though this may not seem like a novel undertaking, the book’s structure and presentation of evidence reframe the way we approach policy and practice in governance, learning, and leadership using critical feminist thought and action. This book succeeds in rekindling the feminist fire in the face of unrelenting condemnation of feminism coming from social media, pundits, politicians, and other (oppressive) groups prevailing today.

Divided into 12 chapters, the book follows a structure wherein a pertinent case or current event grounds the subsequent discussion about the underpinning theoretical, philosophical, and socio-political factors that affect it. As one example, the Idle No More movement (Chapter 2) among Indigenous peoples in Canada is a jarring reminder that feminist critical pedagogy and improved advocacy and petition are needed more than ever as Indigenous communities deal with their troubled relationship with the Canadian state at all levels of government. Themes of feminism relevant to fields of health, social movement, religion, research, and (especially arts) education (Chapters 3 through 7) focus on how feminism operates with and within these domains. In these chapters, much of the criticism is aimed at colonialist, neo-liberal, and positivist progenitors in every level of policy and governance—from federal governments to community leaders and educators. In Chapter 3, English and Irving are careful to distinguish between fostering learning and fostering education and argue that both are integral to nurture critical understanding in others; in other words, formal (school) learning and informal (home, community) education both serve, as Coady argues, to “support people’s analysis of the complexities” when addressing injustice(s) (Coady, 2013, p. 32). Chapters 8 and 10, in particular, emphasize feminism’s theoretical and philosophical foundations, serving as a cohesive yet not definitive description of where and how the different forms of feminism arise out of diverse respective contexts. The term transnational feminism has been coined to capture the common thread among the many forms of feminism: the “sense of learning as a collective to change the world” (p. 105). The topics and scope covered in these chapters depict the tests and triumphs educators

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face in the work toward equality, equity, and representation for women while preserving the distinctions and origins of different forms of feminism.

The relationships between critical feminist thought and capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy, and institutions such as the health care system, education and teaching, social movements and organizations are described in detail. This book demonstrates how within these institutions there is active oppression and marginalization of women and feminist thoughts and actions; however, English and Irving also demonstrate how women, through different feminisms, are becoming empowered to resist these institutional practices and are fighting for equality and equity. In particular, the ways in which feminist thought has moved and operated with and within these themes between past and present are illustrated.

English and Irving call for an approach to activism and feminist thought that attends to process; this process orientation has been popularized by Scott Adams (2013) and James Clear (2016), who argue that the path to success is through “failure” or trial and error. English and Irving call for feminism in community to be constantly transforming and growing to stay abreast of “the tensions inherent in discussions of identity formation and flux” (p. 1). Every mention throughout the text of historical events, “failures,” and outcomes by feminist activism and leadership serves to ground readers in the realization that feminism, as a dynamic movement, is shifting and changing ideas and practices and will continue to be important in the quest for gender equity and equality. English and Irving are writing in a time when the foundations of feminism are being forgotten and some would claim that equality has been achieved and feminism is no longer needed, or that we have moved into a post-feminism era.

English and Irving do not provide actionable recommendations in this book at the national or global level. This may seem like a shortcoming, but the authors remind us that no single solution can be applied to a given struggle. We can borrow from and be inspired by successful (and failed) attempts at reaching agreement, which teaches us that the process of forging a path is necessary for transformation in and of itself. Transformation does not happen suddenly or unintentionally, nor can it occur without attending to the context in which it is situated. This book demonstrates the need for creative and attuned approaches.

The book will be useful to the broader practice and scholarship of feminist thought as an example of how feminism has informed diverse arenas of struggle, including mainstream institutions. It should be required reading for those studying the history, scholarship, and activities of adult education, particularly in courses that provide students with an understanding of the extent of adult education activities and that seek to inform students about the diverse philosophical orientations that have shaped the field. This book is an important contribution to disrupting claims about feminism as a homogeneous discourse and something that is no longer needed. Many of the chapters can be read on their own and be used to add feminist perspectives to areas such as health education.

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