*Radicalizing Learning*, by Stephen D. Brookfield & John D. Holst, Jossey-Bass Publisher, San Francisco, 2011, 262 pages.

This is very thoughtful and at times provocative book introduces a “radical” perspective of learning to the field of adult education. Radical in the sense of educating adults that is “concerned with organizing education for and encouraging learning about the creation of democracy in political, cultural, and economic spheres” (p. 4). It is heavily influenced by the work of Gramsci, Marcuse and other “radical educators” such as Che Guevara, Nelson Mandela, and Paul Robeson. The book seems to be a natural spin off of two earlier works by Brookfield and others, including *The Power of Critical Theory* (2004) and *Learning as a Way of Leading: Lessons for the Struggle of Social Justice* (Preskill & Brookfield, 2008).

Essentially, the goal of a radical practice is the “deliberate and intentional attempt to help people critique capitalist ideology, envision a truly democratic future, and learn socialist practices” (p. 109) within a context of shared responsibility for ensuring basic survival needs for everyone, and fostering, fairness, creativity, and, inclusion. The book approaches this task from a pragmatic and somewhat dispassionate perspective where chapters are organized within a traditional perspective of the field inclusive of adult learning, adult development, training, program planning, and teaching adults. However, there are exceptions, such as the chapter about the aesthetic dimensions of learning. Drawing heavily on the work of Marcuse and others, the authors discuss the role of aesthetics (art, music, theatre) in social movements, such as sounding warnings both as a means to solidify and fostering attention; a means for claiming empowerment; and affirming pride, to mention a few. In addition, their use of authentic examples help bring aesthetics to life, by including Augusto Boal’s work about the theater of oppressed and the use of the documentary *Amandla!* revealing the role of music in the South African struggle against apartheid. In this chapter I found myself taking notes about creative teaching resources for different adult education courses.

One of the most interesting and likely controversial discussions is found in the chapter the *Teaching of Adults*, which attempts to get at the nitty-gritty work of instructing from a radical perspective. If this chapter is read superficially, the reader will leave with some general common-sense features, that inform a radical practice, such as, for example, the importance of illuminating power and hegemony; ways to create a more democratic socialist society; and recognizing that teaching is informed by particular struggles. Although informative, more interesting is the implicit message of the author’s middle road approach to a radical practice. For example, the authors state that all teaching approaches are appropriate, dependent on context. This perspective neuters practice offering a neutral perspective overlooking teaching practices unique epistemological foundations. And then at the same time they state that the teachers need to “subvert modes of teaching that are hierarchical, compartmentalized, competitive and individualistic” (p. 108). The triumph of this book is that it takes an unwavering position about the purpose of adult education, that of confronting a capitalist ideology and fostering socialist democracy, therefore it should do the same with practice.

Teaching with an activist agenda becomes even more interesting when the authors start to question a core approach, long associated with consciousness raising—learner-centered teaching as means to foster social change. To address the students lack of initial experience with socialist democracy the educator is to use “her power to force students to learn about the full range of alternatives” (p. 117) breaking them of a false conscious, reflective of a political detoxification, and only then can “authentic democratic negotiation of curriculum and evaluation can begin” (p. 117). Drawing on Gramsci, the activist educator is seem as a persuader and ironically is encouraged to use their authority and power to indoctrinate learners about a critical theory.

A great strength of this book is that it is chock full of examples of social movements (e.g., the role of the ANC in confronting apartheid in South Africa, the Citizenship Schools organized through Highlander, and activists who played central role in those movements. It is through these examples that much of the book is brought to life. Of particular interest is the brief discussion of Paul Robeson, an African American pop culture singer, the first African-American All-American football player, an expert on musicology, who “strove to use the Hollywood studio system against itself by promoting films that … could help undermine White supremacy” (pp. 166-67). Another individual that is extensively referred to, is the social reformer Che Guevara, who is seen as the epitome of a “radical educator” and whose conception of hegemony takes on a new face, that as “sacrifice imbued with love and empathy transformed into service” (p. 95). Despite the relevance of these models they unfortunately, emerge one-dimensionally, devoid of the complexity and challenges inherent to a radical educator’s role. Most disconcerting is the uncritical and uncontroversial portrayal of Che as a prophetic iconic social activist, whose contested actions such as his use of summary executions of informers and deserters without trial and his support for the use of nuclear missiles during the Cuban Revolution, are completely overlooked. Ironically, by not recognizing the inherent shortcomings of these educators who act has models of leadership in the pursuit of a “socialist democracy”, that is by not separating the “man/women from the myth,” the authors are promoting a false consciousness, not far field from what they contest about Glen Beck and Rush Limbaugh’s misdirected conception of socialism.

Despite these shortcomings the authors accomplish much if not more than what they intended. This book as well as other writings by Brookfield and Holst offer a confrontational view of adult education that challenges the capitalist ideology, and plays a significant role in introducing and re-engaging the field of adult education in the practice of participatory democracy. For books to read in 2011 about adult education this book should be at the top of the list.

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