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## Doctoral Education as a Practice of Adult Education

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## Reimagining Doctoral Education as a Practice of Adult Education

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**Abstract:** This paper synthesizes some of the chapters in a recently published NDACE volume entitled, "Reimagining Doctoral Education as a Practice of Adult Education" (fall, 2015).

**Keywords:** doctoral education, adult education, participatory practices

In this paper, the authors unpack creative ways of conceptualizing doctoral study that build on principles of adult learning, promote more democratically negotiated curricula, collaborative processes, and shift paradigmatic assumptions beyond Eurocentric frameworks. They synthesize some of their findings published in a recent volume of *New Directions of Adult and Continuing Education*.

### Democratizing Doctoral Study

Lindeman envisioned adult education as a venue in which we come to voice. We about learn our way to democracy—a laboratory in which we experimentally came to know our world in order to collectively improve the conditions of life; a laboratory in which we actively and critically pursued the pressing concerns of our day, planning the future together. For adult education, democracy is a verb, a project, something we create by doing, rather than an object of study.

A challenge for us in doctoral education is how to incorporate this understanding of democracy's centrality to the field into the curriculum without reducing democracy to an abstraction. How do we practice democracy in doctoral study, incorporate it into the activities of the classroom, into the relationships among faculty and research scholars? Can students have voice in determining the shape, structure, and content of the curriculum? We suggest they can and in the following begin with identifying three reasons you might think they cannot.

*Unequal power relations among students and faculty.* It is difficult to imagine open and free discussion and debate—the sometimes-heated give and take that characterizes political discourse. Faculty occupy a judgmental platform in evaluating student performance. Faculty are often uncritically accepted as the “adult” in the room, the person who enjoys the last word, while students swallow their dissenting points of view. That position of power is enthroned in the ritual of grading, the finality of exams, and awarding of degrees.

*Accountability of faculty to the university and to the field.* Institutions prescribe course outlines, usually through a rigorous review by faculty, which determine the objectives and content to which learners are subjected. Most disciplines and areas of study provide programmatic guides to what constitutes the sanctioned and required knowledge for the field.

*Policies and rituals of the university are resistant to democracy.* Higher education takes place within a hierarchical and bureaucratic framework that eschews direction from the bottom. Even faculty operate within the reach of administrative demands not always open to negotiation

through democratic means. Student guidebooks impose rules and regulations that affect them outside the classroom and further limit their ability to give voice to an imposed point of view.

*Storming the Barricades.* Much has been written about an experiment in democracy that began in the adult education doctoral program at National-Louis University (Baptiste 201; Baptiste & Brookfield 1997; Bront de Avila, Caron, Flanagan, Frer, Heaney, Hyland, Kerstein, Kowalski, & Rinaldi 2001; Colin & Heaney 2001; Ramdeholl, Abdulla, Giordani, Heaney, & Yanow 2008; Ramdeholl, Giordani, Heaney & Yanow 2010).

In the following, I will reflect on the experience, especially in relation to the three barriers identified above. The experiment was not an unqualified success, mostly because we have little experience in building democratic practices, even in the United States. We have to, as Myles and Paulo remind us, make the road by walking. The results varied by cohort, with some falling short and others remarkably successful. But on to the lessons...

*Unequal Power.* The premise of unequal power between faculty and students is unquestionable true. There is also the challenge of individualizing and dividing the voices of students in a forum that places faculty and students together. The only power students have in this instance would be the power of numbers. An equalization of power could only occur when the students were able to speak with one voice. To accomplish this, they would have to meet separately from the faculty, later to join faculty in a negotiation of their concerns and recommendations.

*Accountability.* Democracy is not incompatible with authority. In negotiations over the substance of the curriculum, legitimate standards trump mediocrity. In negotiations students voice is heard; it does not necessarily prevail. The important point here is that the circle be closed. If faculty cannot accept a position presented by students, it is incumbent on faculty to communicate a compelling rationale for the decision.

*Policies and Rituals.* We recognize that democracies are not totalizing structures, that they always exist in the midst of contradictory and hegemonic institutions, which are hedged by external constraints. It is limited by borders within which shared decision-making and self-governance occurs. In any democracy, there are areas of concern kept off the agenda for public discourse and other areas imposed by more powerful groups outside the borders.

### **You Gotta Be: Embracing Embodied Knowledges in Doctoral Study**

The notion of the body has always troubled the academy. In a world that prizes rationality and theory, structure and relative convention, the body - vulnerable, boundless, reflective of dissimilarities - has often represented something to be both denied and controlled. In many ways, this disconnection from things corporeal is an outgrowth of a Western-based mind/body dualism that has historically valorized the rational workings of the mind and concomitantly presented the less easily restrained physical body as a threat to this control (Bordo, 1993 a, b; Sodhi & Cohen, 2012). Increasingly, traditional conceptualizations of embodiment as threat have been reinforced through regimes of neoliberalism that have highlighted corporatization and deregulation of the university, and de-emphasized multicultural perspectives that honor oppositional stances and democratic educational practices (Darder, 2012).

Post-modern and feminist scholars in diverse fields, including adult education, have increasingly pushed back against this perspective in an effort to challenge the disengagement from experience that neoliberalism valorizes, and reclaim a materiality that has been stripped of its authority and authenticity. (Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Lawrence, 2012; Peile, 1998; Sodhi & Cohen, 2012; Tisdell, 2008). A commitment to understanding how embodiment is situated within a variety of frameworks supports an “embodying of the rational” and a “theorizing of

experience” that illuminates the limitations of these binary concepts and their associated oppositional constructions (Peile, 1998). This generates the possibility of both/and (as opposed to either/or) conceptualizations of self and experience that honor the body/subject as actively contested social constructions. These non-binary interpretations may lead to visions of academia and materiality that are both more dynamic and affirming.

Doctoral education that embraces and honors embodied perspectives creates opportunities – and spaces – for the academic and material to engage (hooks, 2003). Nurturing a stance that allows faculty and students to actively grapple with the experiential in the classroom provides a foundation for deeper understandings of the scholarly and the self, by making theory more tangible and offering crucial challenges to disciplinary “truths” (Darder, 2012; 2015). A more transparent examination of corporeality and content can also create a template for inquiry that alters how research questions are constructed, allowing academic work to be pushed in important new directions. Embodied learning practices that use narrative, broadly defined, can also play role in decolonizing the educational process by bringing the body, emotions and the mind together in dynamic ways (Lawrence, 2012). Listening to, documenting and performing our bodily experiences acts as a way to defy the limits placed on forms of expression that are deemed irrational and “unscientific.” Dialogues facilitated through writing and drama can locate knowledges in our corporeal-realities that have the potential to both inform and produce change (hooks, 2003).

The drive to create embodied strategies of resistance to neoliberalism rests in work that centers the margins and interrogates practices that normalize disconnection (Collins, 2000; hooks, 2000). In honoring the ability to be both a source of data and a basis for transformation embodied knowledges open up possibilities for learning that are more expansive, emotionally responsive and complicated. Scrutinizing environments where difference, discontinuity, and contradiction abound can spur transformative innovations that alter classroom practices and foster new visions of academic community (Darder, 2015; hooks, 2003). Furthermore, by placing embodied knowledges at the forefront, the periphery becomes a dynamic focal point, a starting place for reflecting on being and what it means to *be* (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1992).

### **New Visions of Doctoral Study**

I was looking for a doctoral program that reflected my commitments, a program that interrogated and shared power with students, that invited students to use interdisciplinary lenses in examining power relations, systemic levels of oppression, with a focus on more equitable alternatives as well as strategies of resistance. Much is written about the doctoral program at National Louis University elsewhere (Brookfield, 2013; Ramdeholl, Giordani, Heaney, Yanow, 2010) so I won't repeat all of it here except to highlight some ways this was a space that served as an intentional critique of dominant systems with an emphasis on collective knowledge production.

As students, we were responsible for group teach-ins. During our first residential summer institute, we were responsible for reading each other's learning autobiographies--our first assignment--and for meeting together in small groups to give each other feedback. We had opportunities to then revise our papers based on this feedback. There was space in the curriculum to honor different ways of knowing/learning/and teaching.

At the heart of the program was a process called governance. This was a contested process/space where faculty and students shared and negotiated power, in all of its dilemmas and tensions. During governance, the cohort met without faculty to discuss matters affecting the direction of the program: curriculum, guest speakers, dates to choose advisors, support groups,

teaching topics, and formats. Each meeting ended with faculty rejoining the group and one of the facilitators giving an oral report in front of faculty/peers about what had been proposed. The teaching team would then approve, reject with rationales, or offer a compromise based on the proposal.

Meetings without faculty were often heated. We were, after all, coming with internalized pre-authored scripts from the dominant culture while simultaneously attempting to subvert those scripts based on new learning. The reality of being collective products of a dehumanizing, racist, patriarchal, capitalist society, often intruded in that space and those interactions. We were also located in higher education where boundaries of what constitutes knowledge is carefully policed and guarded. Some of us wondered how far could we, as students, really push the envelope? Where did the limits of our "freedom" exist? Seemingly benign incidents triggered landmines. While the process was necessarily difficult, it was a sincere attempt to negotiate ways of sharing power in more consensus driven models that nurtured the radical imagination and our own agency.

A component of the program was an Africentric module that most of us found tremendously important; a major component of why many of us had chosen to study at National Louis University. There was a commitment from faculty to make space for collective decision-making and to enact theories we were engaging. Democratic alternatives, after all, don't happen from the sidelines (Brookfield & Holst, 2010).

### **My Current Practice: Walking Slowly and Questioning as I Walk**

After graduating, I unexpectedly entered the world of higher education at Empire State College. In the context of the academy, I wonder how intellectuals can challenge and expand those boundaries, rethinking how we produce knowledge and the ways in which it is consumed and shared. And don't intellectuals exist outside the academy? I believe we, as humans, all have responsibilities to interpret, engage, and change the social world. We all have a responsibility to critique the sheer weight of hegemony we face as an empire. This critique is different from getting people riled up instead of collectively arriving at new intellectual spaces and places where protest is resistance (instead of ritual event).

In working with students, I am aware and attentive to dominant power relations and ways those could be subverted in equitable and compassionate ways. I ask myself how we keep ourselves open enough to be moved by other people's ideas? How do we understand how the radical imagination gets collectively sparked and sustained? How could we co-create and sustain conditions to make this a reality? A democratized learning community in any venue values students as co-creators of knowledge. Educational communities need to (and sometimes can) become spaces of democratization and equity, fueling in students the skills and will to become change agents, moving us closer to a functioning participatory democracy. Critical instructors often invite students to use interdisciplinary lenses in unpacking power relations and systemic oppression in our society; and reimagine equitable alternatives, along with strategies and goals of resistance. Concretely, readings in each class I teach are explicitly rooted in emancipatory frameworks that methodically critique dominant frameworks and how they came to be constructed in this way.

If we can begin to think about the university as a site of public good where it's possible to have constellations of competing narratives--and where foundations are collectively reframed and interrogated instead of rebranded--doctoral programs might have some of the elements of the program at NLU. Unfortunately, in the current overtly neoliberal climate, structure has instead become about cheap teaching instead of reimagining narratives that are explicitly grounded in

social justice paradigms. Narratives are individualized, as if our material conditions have nothing to do with the individual. Mostly teaching is done by adjuncts.

If social justice is part of what we ascribe to in doctoral education--and there is no reason it should not be--then we have to attend to incredible disparities on the ground and work with students in ways that take this into account. Research/education isn't born outside of people's lived circumstances and material conditions, and finding ways to counter the systematic dispossession of low income communities, through research, while attending to ongoing pain that accompanies collective traumatization of entire communities is essential. We **all** must understand the broad strokes of racial capitalism and ways in which these seep in through and around us.

Part of our work is to connect in solidarity with those existing spaces, working to sustain and expand them. We must name what has been rendered invisible and work to create a fundamentally different culture than what we're fighting against.

I invite you to pursue it in ways that leave our world a gentler, kinder, more loving place (for everyone, not just a privileged few).

### **Blended Shore Education: Civic Engagement and Competencies**

*The Genesis of the Academy and its Values in the US.* In the immediate forerunners of 21<sup>st</sup> Century universities, we find values of education of the Roman Catholic Church (Riché, Contreni & McClintoch, 1978). Dating back to the early 6<sup>th</sup> Century, North American higher education programs are still modeled after those of the cathedral schools and monasteries in the Middle Ages (Begley & Koterski, 2005). Today, few graduate degree programs offer alternatives to traditional and institutionally designed and approved curricula and delivery, based primarily on interpretations of andragogy (Knowles, 1970/1980; 1977). Graduate degree programs risk non-accreditation were they to color much outside of the lines of conventional ISD. Sticking to conventional designs, we forego the possibilities found within our intercontinental knowledge base of Adult Education.

*Radical Reflection and Critical Analysis: The Pillars of the BSE Theoretical Framework.* These prevailing systems do not match the needs of today's dynamic, globally interwoven environments where information doubles at nano-speed and change is the new constant. Teachers and students ought to possess the kind of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that aids them in making context-driven decisions. Construction of knowledge and application of skills depend on our ability to discern real time facts. Problem-posing and decision-making necessitate critical analysis. BSE offers a framework for program design that is tightly tethered to the roots of criticality, i.e., constitutive phenomenology and emancipatory education with a sprinkling of social engagement.

*The Blended Shore Education Design in A Nutshell.* The BSE melds elements of participatory education (Freire, 1970), phenomenology (Stanage, 1987), and Blended Shore Education (Strohschen, 2009) critical reflection (Brookfield, 1995) and transformational teaching and learning (Mezirow, 1981; 1991; 1997) to *re-consider* the design praxis of adult educationists. Two dimensions and four pillars scaffold BSE to guide critically examined exploration, analysis, and decision of program designs.

BSE guides in synthesizing appropriate education program designs from a multiplicity of roles, strategies, methods, and techniques of disparate ideologies and theories. BSE offers a metagogical Learning–Teaching Spectrum (Strohschen & Elazier 2005) of roles and methods, that was recently concretized in the Metagogy Theorem. (Strohschen & Associates, 2016)

The spectrum approach ultimately upholds interdependence between student and teacher in the learning process as the pivotal relationship aspect needed for selecting suitable combinations of appropriate instructional approaches for given learning tasks. Each stakeholder in the education process spirals through the positions in the learning-teaching relationship category (i.e., from dependent to independent) arriving at interdependence. Issues of mastery vs. novice or positionality and power are averted, and the education process can be in the hands of student and teacher in the way social construction was intended by Gergen (2001).

*Delivering Doctoral Education: The Proposed Possibility.* BSE calls for co-constructing, critical reflection, and transparency of values to make socially responsible choices that are grounded in values of social interdependence and accept multiplicity of teaching methods that align to learning tasks.

In its design, content is not derived solely from texts or experience. Although prevailing scholarly literature for particular focus areas and subthemes supplement the study in community projects, faculty and students investigate and access content knowledge in real life, real time settings in communal social engagement projects. Social/civic engagement activities are identified and coordinated by faculty members and the doctoral students with community stakeholders. Content delivery/instruction is not a faculty-centered responsibility. Interdependently, community-based organizations, public institutions, social service providers, education agencies, and community residents provide and co-create knowledge through action and agency. Instruction does not take place in university-housed or virtual classrooms only. Participation in projects and services is key to gaining knowledge and practicing skills. Assessment and evaluation of learning are not based on conventional assessment criteria, legitimized with grades. Achievement of competence is measured with authentic performance-based evaluation in the practice setting, wherein criteria and benchmarks for assessment are designed with stakeholders.

If flux is a constant nowadays, then Blended Shore Education is a fitting contemporary universal to developing and implementing education programs across cultures, ideologies, nations, and time (Strohschen, 2009): The adult is the focus and content as she arrives at self-examined person (Stanage, 1987). The BSE framework lets the designer blend practices to interdependently guide student and teacher to implement contextually appropriate education programs within a “culturally reflexive consciousness” (Gergen in Strohschen, 2009, p.x).

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