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Recommended Citation

Parrish, Marilyn McKinley and Rineer, Carla (2015). "Interrogating What Remains Inviting Learners to Explore Cultural Artifacts from the Past," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <http://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2015/papers/35>

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Interrogating What Remains: Inviting Learners to Explore Cultural Artifacts from the Past

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Keywords: adult learning; cultural artifacts; primary sources; critical reflection; archives

Abstract: This paper explores the theoretical basis for the practice of investigating cultural artifacts in order to gain deeper understanding about the values, meanings and contexts of other time periods and cultures. Adult learners are invited to view culture from the margins through an exploration of the lives of people whose race, class, and gender form the basis of oppression by the powerful. Texts and narratives that provide evidence of daily-ness and ordinary-ness will be featured and implications of this engagement for adult learners will be explored.

Introduction

Adult learners are gathered at a university archive to learn about historical primary source materials. Working in groups, they ponder disturbing connections between sets of photographs of the Fitter Family and Better Baby contests, which speak of the influence of eugenics in the U.S., and Nazism. They analyze a book published in the 19th century that promotes the view that women who pursue higher education will not be able to bear children. They consider the use of objects that were immediately recognizable within certain contexts and time periods but are now obscured by a 21st century point of view. What's happening here? Through engagement with cultural artifacts, adult learners are temporarily displaced from their everyday context. They are beginning the process of interrogating what remains through an exploration of uncommon narratives found in archives & historical societies.

For the past decade and in a variety of settings (university classrooms, archives, conference workshops and presentations), the authors have invited adult learners in explorations of cultural artifacts to encourage deeper and greater critical reflection about the values, meanings and contexts of other time periods and cultures. Rather than accepting texts/facts at face value, learners take on a questioning stance to focus on meaning (the story behind the story). Deciding, for example, against the narrative of the wealthy and powerful within local communities, this inquiry-based approach asks learners to view culture from the margins (Kemp & Parrish, 2010). We invite learners to move past repressive tolerance (Brookfield, 2005) and to begin the process of thinking and learning more critically and holistically.

All societies, institutions, and individuals generate cultural artifacts in physical and digital form. We define cultural artifacts as evidence left behind by individuals, communities, corporations, and governments. These artifacts may be books, periodicals, broadsides, letters, diaries, government publications, objects, photographs, works of art, blog posts, digital objects, or the built environment of a community (architecture, sculpture, memorials, etc.). Artifacts may be created intentionally by individuals or

generated in the ongoing activity of a business or organization. Artifacts may speak about the silent and at times artifacts allow the silent to speak. For example, a letter written by a Quaker woman captures the details (and her excitement) about hearing Frederick Douglass speak in Philadelphia just after the Civil War. An annotated photograph album provides glimpses of what the African American women who led a community organization during the middle of the 20th century valued. The built environment of a university campus demonstrates specific values through the naming of buildings after powerful white men. Early documentation of the slave trade provides grim detail about the number of slaves on specific ships, along with captain's names and countries of origin and destination. Each of these artifacts presents a unique perspective and each is created in a specific time period for an intended audience and purpose. Examining evidence relating to individuals, organizations, businesses, or governments helps learners to engage critically with their assumptions about the past and present (Rineer & Parrish, 2012). In this paper, we use the terms artifacts and texts interchangeably.

Drawing on the fields of literary theory and cultural studies, the purpose of this paper is to explore the use of cultural artifacts as an educational approach to engage adult learners with new perspectives. A review of the theoretical perspectives that contribute to our approach in using cultural artifacts for learning will be followed by a discussion of implications for the field of adult education.

The Theory Behind Our Practice

The authors begin with the assumption that inviting learners to engage with cultural artifacts opens new avenues for learning about the world and about themselves. Operating within a cultural and educational institution (the university archives) that collects a community's heritage and serves as a complex site of teaching and learning, the authors engage learners with cultural artifacts that offer contested views of a community's past. This work proceeds from a feminist and social constructivist philosophy of teaching and learning (Hayes & Flannery, 2000; Lerner, 1993; Rineer & Parrish, 2012). The theoretical perspectives examined here fall into three areas: sociocultural/historical context, unraveling power, and hearing from diverse voices.

Situating the Sociocultural/Historical Context

The process of engaging with cultural artifacts invites learners to uncover evidence of the perspectives that support and contest dominant/hegemonic narratives. An essential aspect of this exploration is the development of a deeper understanding of the cultural and historical context in which an artifact was created. This work is deeply informed by the contributions of the field of literary theory and the broader world of cultural studies. Literary theorist (and New Historicist) Stephen Greenblatt (1982) promotes the examination of literary texts through exploration of the specific cultures and contexts in which they were created. Learners are encouraged to engage with "the textuality of history" (individuals and groups creating texts/cultural artifacts within specific historical contexts) and "the historicity of texts" (texts/cultural artifacts understood within the context in which they are created) (Montrose, 1989, p. 20).

Learners explore artifacts through observation/description, questioning, and reflection. Beginning with basic description offers a common starting point for artifacts that may seem foreign to the learners' lived experiences. What elements describe the

physical aspects of the artifact? Where and when was the artifact created? Who were the authors/publishers/creators? For what audience was the artifact created? What events are included and what is the basic story line?

As participants further interrogate artifacts, additional critical and reflective questions emerge that drive them to investigate the time period and culture, and to uncover or dismantle previously held assumptions. What perspectives dominate and what stories are told? Whose voices are missing? What aspects are surprising or challenging? For example, when investigating Edward Clarke's (1873) *Sex in Education*, a text focused on the inappropriateness of women pursuing higher education for medical reasons, learners might consider the following questions: How did the author come to believe that women's ovaries would dry up if all of their blood went to their brains as a result of studying? How did the author build his case? What credentials did he have? How was his thesis received? Did women and men agree? When author Mrs. E.B. Duffey replied the following year with a book entitled *No Sex in Education* (1874), how were her perspectives received? What was the author's motivation for publishing her book in the same binding, size, and typeface as Clarke's? Most importantly, what class, race, and gender issues are evidenced in the authors' arguments? What additional source material will help learners understand the context in which the sources were created?

Beginning the process of investigation of artifacts that were created in a distant time and culture can be challenging for adult learners. Yet the invitation to begin this dialogue with voices and perspectives from the past opens up opportunities to examine learners' own assumptions and to understand the rich and tangled complexity of their community's shared past in a more holistic way (Rineer & Parrish, 2012).

Unraveling Power

Perhaps more than any other issue, we are drawn to the use of artifacts/texts because through them we can break the power structures of history and knowledge and give voice those who are often silenced. Althusser (1970) provided the theoretical basis to approach the texts/artifacts at all. Often students--and texts--offer some resistance to the honor we afford them. Students initially cannot imagine that texts produced by someone like them can be important, and the texts themselves frequently diminish their centrality with phrases like: I'm not important. I'm just a poor/black/female/uneducated person of small consequence and limited vision. Althusser recognizes such willing subjugation to ideological apparatus and its function as interpellation, and hence the control continues. Of course, merely upending the established paradigm is not enough since it leaves binary thinking in place and eventuates in the peripeteia (Girard, 1979). The trip of the wheel merely creates a new tyrant and feeds the constant need to sacrifice one victim or another to maintain control.

Foucault's (1994) ideas about power provide a remedy. His writings unite to whittle away at the notion of absolute Truth in knowledge and expose the construction of that truth by the powerful, who, since the 18th century, have categorized people into normal and abnormal. Foucault calls the term normal into question by showing that it is based on the abnormal. We know what is normal by seeing the abnormal. We extend Foucault's notion to the equivalent categories of the important and the unimportant, the special and the common, and the extraordinary and the ordinary. One defining characteristic of ordinary people is the assumption that they do not have knowledge and

are therefore deleted from the intellectual record. The powerful always talk about and define the disempowered, but we seldom hear the disempowered speak of the powerful. We use Foucault's ideas to turn the tables and allow the usually silent disempowered to speak. For example, the Civil War soldier Joseph Mathews' (1864) questions "Old Abe" for not making peace with Jefferson Davis, providing a perspective from below.

Finally, Derrida's (1992) deconstruction provides an escape from the confines of the powerful/disempowered dichotomy. Derrida does not recognize a unified self but sees instead a limit between self and self as an other. In this way, the perception of an important person is cracked. His ideas of deconstruction widen the fissure in two phases. Phase one, dissemination, destabilizes and reverses the hierarchy of the ideal and the material set up by Plato. The previously inferior term must be re-inscribed as the origin or resource of the opposition and hierarchy. This moment, phase two, calls for an attention to the temporal--a return to the history of the beginning of the term. However, Derrida sees time as undecidable; he asserts that it is impossible to decide whether we are experiencing the past, the present, or the future. Hence, the term is destabilized, and the binary gives way. All that remains is the glimmering bricolage.

Hearing Diverse Voices

We join New Historicist theorists (Greenblatt, 1982; Montrose, 1989) in calling learners to find meaning and complexity in the cacophony of diverse voices, rather than viewing literary texts, in particular, as sets of fixed meanings with crises and ending resolutions. We do not privilege traditional literary texts above those viewed as somehow less important, such as street literature, ephemera, broadsides, pamphlets, chapbooks, and religious, legal, philosophical, scientific, and advice writings. Instead, affording these texts equal value allows learners to participate in a conversation between/among them. Historical texts, like literary texts, cry out for questioning and interpretation and should never be viewed as fixed facts. The intent is to focus on representations of marginalized groups and non-normative behaviors, a practice that leads to topics and texts that might be called odd, quirky, or even bizarre.

In addition, drawing on the work of Spivak (2007), our approach utilizes a critical feminist lens to understand the world of subaltern studies—the view from the bottom level of society. As archives typically hold evidence created by a community's elite, the voices of the marginalized too often become lost in investigations of a community's past (Kemp & Parrish, 2010). Since language and narrative are dialogic, paying attention to a multiplicity of voices (Bakhtin, 1981) is essential to disrupt dominant hegemonic narratives. As we explore the temporally situated perspectives of an artifact's creator, new avenues for investigation about whose story is being told open, and we begin hearing directly from those whose lives are written about, those who do not get the chance to narrate their own stories. For example, when learners examine early 19th century crime documents, they are troubled by the inconsistencies between the convicted murderer's confession statements and the trial documents (Lechler, 1822). Why did John Lechler kill his wife Mary? Was it because of her supposed infidelity or was it due to the end of a dubious but lucrative scheme that he designed? Where is Mary's voice? How does this series of events compare to domestic violence today?

The act of seeking out many voices is in and of itself a political and educational act. By imparting a deeper and more complete understanding of learning with artifacts,

often a counter narrative to the dominant historical perspective emerges (Bakhtin, 1981; Borg & Mayo, 2010). The notion of intertextuality, which describes the interplay that occurs as texts/cultural artifacts interact with each other and with learners, (Kristiva, 1980; Barthes, 2010) can be explored with texts such as the Clarke and Duffey mentioned above. After seeing the dialogue of texts, learners become aware of their own positionality and contextually situated perspectives and bring their own texts (themselves) to the conversation. The multiplicity of voices situated within sets of related cultural artifacts create a bricolage to unravel (Derrida, 1992).

Informing Practice

The theoretical perspectives discussed here drive our practice of welcoming learners into a world of wonder. Embarking on such inquiry-based, social constructivist explorations is often disorienting or unsettling for learners. In our experience, learners are fascinated by the texts/artifacts that they interrogate and their disorientation becomes the basis for fruitful and creative work. As learners begin to step outside the strict outcome-based learning settings of K-12, higher education, and other learning environments, they develop the ability to become more comfortable with an open-ended journey in which the outcome is not predetermined. Their exploration of a world that is very different from their own propels them to question assumptions of the past and present.

In our work with adult learners, we highlight the many voices that offer insights about institutional and community history. All institutions have an official story to tell through dominant narratives and hegemonic structures. Our goal is for students to develop the patterns of mind that allow them to see and regularly challenge dominant narratives and to search after the non-dominant ones. We want adult learners to become comfortable with process of disorientation, develop curiosity and the ability to wonder, think critically and creatively, explore commonalities with people in the past, unravel power, seek out diverse perspectives, and reflect on assumptions about past and present.

Implications for the Field of Adult Education

Cultural institutions offer much to the field of adult education. Adult educators and adult learners benefit from practices such as learning with cultural artifacts that invite learners to explore the rich and contested histories of their communities and to celebrate the diverse perspectives present there. As all adult educators and adult learners are constructed and positioned by dominant ideologies, the approach described here offers an opportunity to read and deconstruct cultural artifacts politically, uncovering the complex suppressions and displacements extant in life and text. Learners are invited to a deeper journey of critical thinking and disruption of assumptions, past and present, societal and personal. The potential result is a more nuanced understanding of the situated and contested meanings that cultural artifacts hold, leading to deeper awareness of the complexities of the cultures and communities in which adults live and learn. This call to interrogate cultural artifacts within local, regional, national communities is a call to engage in critical reflection outside the classroom to challenge assumptions and to understand more completely the rich complexities of our communities' stories.

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