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## From Global Consciousness to Social Action: An Examination of Adult Education Theory

Lilian H. Hill  
*University of Georgia*

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# **From Global Consciousness to Social Action: An Examination of Adult Education Theory**

**Lilian H. Hill**

University of Georgia

**Abstract.** This paper links 1) social action theories in adult education, and 2) literature about the transition to a global consciousness, a world view emerging in the latter part of this century. Global consciousness does not emanate from a single body of literature, but exists within many disciplines.

## **Introduction**

We are moving away from the prevalent industrial/scientific paradigm that has influenced so many of our ideas and philosophies, ways of doing business, social structures, values, and ways of living. In the process of evolving into the next major paradigm, which has yet to be assigned a name everyone agrees on, our fundamental values and concepts about the world will change. People will literally change their minds, not in the capricious way often ascribed to women, but in essential ways so that our understandings of how the world operates and our place in it may change radically.

The existing paradigm characterized by materialism, competition, and individualism is beginning to collapse due to the advent of new scientific knowledge and the overwhelming evidence of negative consequences including environmental degradation, displacement and exploitation of people, extensive pollution, and the disassociation of people from the community and the earth that sustains them. Global consciousness offers the ability to understand the connections between seemingly unrelated problems and issues such as environmental degradation, the increasing poverty and displacement of people around the world alongside increasing wealth for a few, backlash against immigration and minority rights, increasing fundamentalism, and many other ills visible today.

It is important to differentiate between the global economy and the emerging paradigm, which I have chosen to term global consciousness, because the existing economic and emerging holistic paradigms of globalism differ in their essential goals. At the heart of both the economic and holistic paradigms are different world views. The global economy as described by Hawken (1993), Korten (1995), Henderson (1996) and others refers to a way of doing business enmeshed in the receding industrial/scientific paradigm in which nature exists to be exploited, conspicuous consumption is promoted, people value their individualism over their responsibility to the community, and government and free market economies are expected to fulfill the responsibilities thus neglected. The economic paradigm 1) views people as primarily motivated by self-interest manifest in the pursuit of money, 2) perceives that what earns the most money for individuals and corporations is good for society, 3) sees competition as more sensible than cooperation, and 4) promotes ever-higher levels of consumer spending (Korten, 1995; Kresse, 1997). The result are taken for granted beliefs about the value of sustained economic growth, free markets, economic globalization, privatization, and government deregulation.

By contrast, global consciousness describes a consciousness that is more capable of accepting diversity and difference, capable of handling ambiguity, and cognizant of our interdependence and connections with

humankind and the earth. What I have chosen to term global consciousness describes a consciousness that 1) is capable of developing a more inclusive world view and forming allegiances beyond the local, 2) is cognizant of the interdependence among humans and between humankind and the earth, 3) is able to cope comfortably with ambiguity, and 4) values complexity and diversity. What is required are changes in the way we think, the way we relate to the rest of the world, and way we identify with all of humanity (Capra, 1996; Daloz et al., 1996; Hill, submitted; Kegan, 1994; Lifton, 1993; Ornstein, 1991).

### Purpose

If one accepts the necessity of changes in human consciousness described by these authors and others, the next question becomes what can be done to foster these changes? The authors reviewed here make it clear that our society is undergoing upheavals and schisms that learners are struggling to make sense of. Cultural commentary characterizes our time as one of transition in which conservative and progressive forces clash (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler & Tipton, 1996; Gergen, 1991; Hunter, 1991). Freire (1973) writes that the move from one epoch to another requires a flexible and critical perspective. It is inevitable that emerging values will clash with established values in the culture, but without the ability to perceive critically the cultural dialogue between old and new, people will be carried along in the wake of change.

It appears that while authors advocating changes of the human mind are quite clear about what changes need to take place, they are not nearly as clear about how it should be accomplished. Neither does the call for a more encompassing consciousness appear to be articulated clearly within the educational literature. Education is one of the ways we help societal members organize and structure their experiences. The way we teach and learn provides a source of both continuity and change since education is also the way we transform culture. If education is responsible for cultural transmission as well as transformation, then adult education can be one of the sources of changes in human consciousness.

Adult education can make a significant contribution to cultural transformation by drawing on its historical allegiance to social action and change. Cultural change only occurs if innovations gain acceptance by large numbers of people. Bohannon (1994) states that the need for new social innovations is urgent to cope with destruction of the environment and mass poverty. To succeed, large numbers of people must be sufficiently uncomfortable with old ways of behavior so that they will change their habit patterns. Cultural change is an intensely social process in which education has a critical role to play (Carter, 1992). This paper establishes the links between social action in adult education and the nurture of global consciousness.

### Implications for Adult Education Theory

Adult education has historically been shaped by two very different movements, one connected to social action or social change, and the other linked to personal and economic development (Merriam & Brockett, 1997). Adult education is a diverse field and answers to differing conditions worldwide, fostering literacy in third world countries or educating workers for a technological workplace in industrialized nations. Despite the field's association with a distinct social agenda when it was named as a field of practice during the 1920's, much adult education philosophy and theory has focused on the growth of the individual

Heaney (1996) points out that adult education has strayed from its concern with education for social action. He argues that "action to change and sculpt social conditions was the point--the redeeming social purpose that inspired the fledgling, newly identified field of adult education." Adult education aimed not only "to *inspire* individual learners . . . but also to enable those learners to *conspire*--to unite, melding their individual agendas in collaborative planning and social action" (p. 13, emphasis in original). Recently, much of adult education has become instrumental in nature, helping adults adapt to a changing social and economic world,

and sometimes conform to the existing social order. Our understandings are impoverished by the emphasis on individualism and self-reliance.

Newman (1994) describes several ways of conceiving of the individual and advocates for decentering the individual subject. He suggests that consciousness may appear to exist independently, but argues that it is constructed through life activity that "takes place within social relations between people and in relations between people and objects of the world" (pp. 129-130). Collective action is required to influence social policy and adult education has a role to play in this effort by helping learners examine common and shared experiences, identify common meanings, and engage in the struggle to transform those meanings, thereby transforming the societies in which we live.

Learning and consciousness are intimately linked to cognition; we can foster the consciousness of interdependence, interconnectedness, cooperation, and diversity as central to our capability of survival and flourishing. The call for a global consciousness in essence entails recognition of the need for change in a common world view characterized by individualism, independence, entrepreneurial freedom, and a Protestant-capitalist work ethic resulting in prevalent competition, exploitation, and domination. McKenzie's definition of adult education is that ideally it should help adults "develop and actualize their various potentialities to the end that the learners become more liberated as individuals, better capacitated to participate in the lives of their communities and institutions, and empowered to create an authentically human future" (1991, p. 129). The lessons we teach need to foster empathy and altruism, encourage humility and generosity, and encourage taking responsibility.

Several reasons exist for linking global consciousness and the social action theories of adult education. Both are concerned with social change and with inequities in society in which certain people are deemed to have less--fewer resources, less control over the conditions of their lives, and lesser rights, in practice if not in theory, to a decent life. Often these people are members of minority groups, however that concept may be defined where they live. "Marginalized people do not enjoy sufficient opportunities to take control of their lives or to influence society as much as they would if they had decision-making powers" (Gumede, 1997). Neglect of the needs of the marginalized impoverishes all of society.

Not only does adult education have a history of involvement in social action and concern for social change, but it also has familiarity with tools to accomplish learning together. Recent ERIC publications explore group learning, collaborative learning, adult education and social action, and popular education for social change. Finger (1995) indicates that adult education has two features that facilitates its contribution to cultivating global consciousness:

1. Unlike conventional education and all other social sciences, adult education defines problems in terms of learning, as opposed to training, teaching, preaching, policy-making, legislating, restructuring and management.
2. Adult education, especially in the perspective of political empowerment, does have a past in which individual learning was perceived in relationship to collective action. (p. 117).

Two areas of practice in adult education are making significant contributions to 'learning our way out' of the global and increasingly interlinked biophysical and socio-cultural crisis: community development and organizational learning. Finger indicates that community development has practices and models to conceptualize and address collective problems and organizational learning is developing models of social learning.

Merriam and Brockett (1997) describe several values of adult education favoring social change. Collaborative learning involves people learning together about issues of mutual concern. It is learning that is locally initiated and controlled. A different conception of knowledge production exists in adult education for social

action in which the socially disenfranchised and uneducated can create legitimate knowledge. Knowledge is produced when people make sense of their world and knowledge is based on their experience as they construct tools, methods, and approaches to cope with the situations facing them. This meaning-making notion of knowledge production leads to an understanding of power imbalances in society. "Understanding the networks of power relations and the boundaries of power leads to challenging inequalities in society and ultimately seeking to change the balance of power" (p. 252). Finally, reflection and action on problems are both required. Praxis, in which reflection and action are fused, "create a dynamic process in which the learners act upon themselves and on their world, bringing about a change their own consciousness, and in the way they engage with other people, organizations, institutions and objects around them" (Newman, 1994, p. 110).

Social action requires a comprehensive understanding of the problems or issues of concern. Without global consciousness, social action may be rendered ineffective or, as Finger (1995) suggests, inappropriate. Adult education has displayed an interest in critical thinking as evidenced by the work of Brookfield (1987) and Mezirow (1990). Brookfield indicates that critical thinking enables us to become open to alternative ways of looking at and behaving in the world. Likewise, Mezirow believes that "critical thinking involves a critique of the presuppositions on which our beliefs have been built" (p. 1). In that volume, Heaney and Horton link critical thinking and struggles for social change. Critical reflection is necessary to transformative action.

Global consciousness is concerned with widespread changes of thinking. These changes could engender changes of behavior regarding wise use of resources, more selective consumption, and a backlash against harmful and wasteful personal and wasteful business practices. It could be said that the transition to global consciousness requires a collective perspective transformation. Transformational learning is fundamentally concerned with the meaning people make of their experiences and how that meaning is changed. Rather than our understandings of reality being objective and external, they are constructed in the mind and are often rooted in the social expectations, rules, and roles taught by culture that govern the way we see, think, act, and feel. Meaning systems are structured by beliefs, theories, and psycho-structural assumptions. This is both an individual process and a collective, cultural one. While meaning schemes are a wonderful tool allowing us to structure and make sense of our perceptions, they can also be limiting by filtering and screening our experiences. They allow us to attend to and understand certain experiences while neglecting others (Clark, 1993).

We use language to create meaning. "The naming of the world is the means whereby adults find voice and begin their empowerment. The work of constructing truth is both a personal and collective responsibility, and Freire equates it to creating culture" (Clark, 1993, p. 51). When the limitations of a meaning scheme are recognized, they can be expanded, revised, or simply replaced. Transformation of meaning schemes may be an individual or social process. Mezirow and Daloz tend to focus on individual development, while in Freire's theory the goal is social change (Clark, 1993). In both cases, critical reflection is required to examine limiting or flawed assumptions incorporated in our meaning schemes allowing the development of more inclusive perspectives. Whether individual or social, consensual agreement is generally required to validate our interpretations. O'Sullivan (1997) ventures "the thesis that it is the fundamental educational task of our time to make the choice for sustainable global-planetary habitat of interdependent life forms over and against the pathos of the global competitive marketplace" (p.372).

Adult education, through community development, takes an interest in groups active in the issues of their community. Several authors point to the activities of grassroots activists as evidence of adult learning leading to social action. Welton (1993) believes the new social movements, most commonly identified as peace, feminist, ecological, and personal and local autonomy movements, are significant expressions of postmodern culture and adult education. He then traces learning that occurs within these movements and identifies four basic principles weaving these disparate movements together: ecology, social responsibility, grassroots democracy, and nonviolence. Finally, Welton speculates about whether these movements may be coalescing into a new historic movement.

Henderson (1996) devotes a chapter to grassroots globalism and states the "most creative, energetic forces addressing the planetary problems of poverty, social inequality, pollution, resource development, violence

and war are grassroots citizens movements. . . .Grassroots globalism is about thinking and acting, locally and globally" (1996, p. 131). Even though participation in these movements is voluntary, recent research indicates that many involved in these movements feel morally called upon to act or that it is a duty (Daloz et al. 1996; Moore & Hill; this volume) The pragmatic solutions created by citizen movements are often innovative, and stress positive action. "Citizen organizations are a priceless resource offering new paradigms to societies stuck in old ways or trapped, as Western industrial societies are, in wasteful consumption habits and technologies that are proving unsustainable" (Henderson, 1996, p. 142).

Unless we wish to remain with the limited vision of education as an investments in human capital (Gustavsson, 1997), we must revitalize the work of adult education for social action. The authors writing about global consciousness provide ample evidence of the urgent and essential nature of the change we must make. Adult education possesses many of the tools and a historical commitment to social change. If we, as adult educators, consider ourselves committed to the lives of the people we work with, the societies we live in, the environment we are a part of, and the spirituality of the natural world, we must act

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