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Adult Learning and Self Work

Mark Tennant
University of Technology, Sydney, Australia

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Abstract: *The purpose of this paper is to theorize adult education as a vehicle for self change and to explore how such theorizing has consequences for practice as an adult educator.*

Introduction

Adult educators are almost always engaged in promoting learning for personal change. Sometimes this is made explicit, for example in programs which aim to improve self-esteem, or self-concept, or which help people discover their "authentic" self. Sometimes it is more implicit; for example in programs which address significant social issues such as gender stereotyping, racial discrimination, migration, domestic violence, environmental concerns, and perhaps health issues: the idea being that individual change is inextricably linked to broader social change. In the workplace, too, most changes imply a reorientation of individuals' values or attitudes or the way they see themselves, for example in learning how to implement a new innovation, or a new technology, or a new set of procedures in the workplace, education plays a role in influencing new worker identities. In all such programs, I argue, our pedagogical practices contain implicit theorizations concerning the nature of the self, its development or capacity for change, and the way the self relates to others or to society more generally. By engaging with theorizations concerning the self, and self change, practitioners will better be able to analyze their own assumptions, make explicit their theoretical position, and tailor their pedagogical practices accordingly.

The purpose of this paper is to theorize adult education as a vehicle for self change and to explore how such theorizing has consequences for practice as an adult educator. Historically, the most dominant theorizations have come from developmental psychology. In particular the psychological literature on adult development has been seen as a source of understanding the dynamics of change in adult life, and as such has been screened for its pedagogical implications. Although this literature is quite diverse, by and large it has in common the conventional view that adult education can lead to a greater awareness of self through cultivating a self which is independent, rational, autonomous, coherent, and which has a sense of social responsibility. Such a view of the self has been strongly challenged in recent years from a range of different theoretical positions, largely because it is seen as overly static and essentialist, and thus ignoring the socially constructed nature of selfhood. At the very least the increasing pluralisation of society has challenged any pretence that universal social and normative frames of reference can provide unchanging anchoring points for identity. Indeed, increasing social and cultural mobility has begun to erode the possibility of developing a self built on any singular and stable socio-cultural community. This has meant that the fashioning of "self" has become an individual reflexive enterprise, a lifelong learning project in which the subject incorporates experiences and events into an ongoing narrative about the self. (See Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992; Gergen, 1996). The argument presented in this paper is that the focus on the self as text or narrative offers new possibilities for understanding learning and its relation to self-change. The paper commences with some general observations about the nature and limitations of dominant psychological theorizations of the self which have informed adult education practice. It then traces the various critiques of such theorizations (e.g., Rose, 1996) and proposes a narrative approach to understanding.the self. This is followed by an analysis of the pedagogical implications of adopting such a perspective within a relational view of the self.

Theorizing Self Change

The theoretical models of adult development most frequently cited in adult education texts are those of Maslow, Havighurst, Erikson, Levinson, Gould, Loevinger, and Labouvie-vief. Each of these models presents a descriptive account of development, an explanation of the fundamental processes underlying developmental progress, and a clear view

of the end point of development: the mature, fully developed, psychologically healthy person.

All the above approaches attempt to chart the life course in terms of a sequence of phases or stages: periods of stability, equilibrium and balance alternate, in a largely predictable way, with periods of instability and transition. Accepting for the moment that the life course is indeed quite predictable and stable: what is the source of this predictability and stability? Is it the result of a natural psychological unfolding or maturation? Or is it the result of the living out of a set of largely social expectations which vary from one society to another and from one historical period to another? If the latter, to what extent do social and cultural groupings construct and then prescribe the life course patterns of their members? These are the kinds of questions which were being asked in the mid-1980's within the developmental psychology academy at the same time that Gilligan (1986) was challenging the gender bias in developmental theories (see the proceedings of a conference on the theme of "social structure and social construction of life stages," published in Human Development, 1986, *29*, 145-180). In many ways the questions are trivial to sociologists, but they are significant because they represent an attempt to incorporate sociological theory into an ongoing interest in self-development and change. The arguments being advanced were essentially threefold: firstly that age-graded norms, statuses and roles are a feature of social organization; secondly, that the state is a key producer of the institutionalization of the life course; and finally, that the phenomenon of the "self" as an organized human subjectivity, is itself a social construction (at least in part). Now the first two of these arguments are quite compatible with extant attempts to chart the life course: all that is needed is a commonsense recognition that the life course varies historically and culturally, and a recognition that there exist a diversity of trajectories which are equally legitimate. But the idea that the concept of "self" is also socially constructed poses a more fundamental challenge to the psychology academy. After all, the "self" is the very subject of psychology, and all the developmental theories assume a self which, however connected to society, is ultimately separate from society. This is an assumption which also pervades much therapeutic and educational work: whether the task is to discover one's authentic self, to transcend social constraints, to release one's inner longings, to unmask the false assumptions of childhood, or to critically reflect on one's sociocultural assumptions and thereby challenge them. Further challenges to the privileging of the autonomous self in psychology can be found in the writings of Burman (1994) and Rose (1996).

Theorizations about the self and its capacity for change are clearly critical to the way we conceive of therapeutic and educational interventions. It is clear from the above that a view of the self as standing separate from the social realm cannot be sustained. What then are the implications for practice of a theorization of the self that begins with its socially constructed nature? Well this depends on how one understands "social construction" and the processes leading to such a construction. One view of social construction is that exemplified by critical pedagogy whereby the self participates in its own subjugation and domination through "false consciousness" produced by membership of a particular social group, or through the internalization of social "oppression" via the mechanism of "repression" (in the psychoanalytic sense). But critical pedagogy tends to reify the social as a monolithic "other" which serves to oppress and crush the self. Self change in critical pedagogy is based on ideology critique, whereby the aim is to analyze and uncover of one's ideological positioning, to understand how this positioning operates in the interests of oppression, and through dialogue and action, free oneself of "false consciousness." The problem with this is that it theorizes a self which is capable of moving from "false" to "true" consciousness: that is, a rational and unified self which is capable of freeing itself from its social situatedness. In this way critical pedagogy shares common ground with the andragogical and humanistic traditions, traditions which it opposes for their individualistic approach.

It seems that what is needed is a view of social construction which avoids the assumption of a unitary, coherent and rational, subject. A way forward is to replace this view of the individual with the idea of the subject as a position within a discourse. In this way the "subject" and the "social" are not seen as opposed to each other, but as jointly produced through discursive practices (see Henriques and others, 1984 for a pioneering and influential work which introduced this notion to psychology). What is required then, is a shift in the theories upon which adult education draws: from theories of the knowing subject, to theories of discursive practices.

The contemporary debate in this respect is centered on the role of narrative or discourse in shaping or positioning the "self."

The idea of narrative is attractive to therapists and educators because they are often confronted with the "stories" of clients and learners and invariably need to respond in some way. These stories emerge from a particular problem or issue but they are invariably stories about aspects of the self-perceptions of well being, self satisfaction, self esteem, self doubt, efficacy, and so on. One approach is to accept the story as "given," that is true for the person concerned, and to work within the boundaries and parameters of the story as told. But this limits the capacity of the educator or therapist to intervene: their role becomes advisory only, there is no fundamental challenge to the definition of the problem, and there is little prospect that the problem will be addressed in all its complexity. An alternative is to challenge the story as told with a view to exploring different narratives about the self. It is at this point that two quite different approaches to the narrative are apparent.

One approach views a narrative construction as a lens through which the world is seen or as a kind of internal model which is a guide to identity and action. The role of educational and therapeutic intervention is to explore different ways of viewing the world and different internal models to guide action, that is, to construct a new "replacement" narrative which is more functional and adaptive for the person concerned. The resulting re-authoring of the self has as a normative goal a single, unified and coherent narrative which resides in the mind of a single individual.

Gergen and Kaye's (1992) alternative is to see the self as relational, as a form of language game. In the exploration of new ways of relating to others, a multiplicity of self-accounts is invited, but a commitment to none. In a therapeutic context, such an approach: "...encourages the client, on the one hand, to explore a variety of means of understanding the self, but discourages a commitment to any of these accounts as standing for the 'truth of self.' The narrative constructions thus remain fluid, open to the shifting tides of circumstance to the forms of dance that provide fullest sustenance" (p. 255). The idea of self narration changing according the relationship in which one is engaged illustrates a shift in focus from individual selves coming together to form a relationship, to one where the relationship takes center stage, with selves being realized only as a byproduct of relatedness.

The main theoretical tension apparent in the above approaches to a narrative understanding of the self is whether the process of self narration should or could be targeted towards the construction of a stable, coherent "bounded" identity as a normative goal; or whether such a project is a chimera, neither desirable nor possible in a world of multiple and shifting, open-ended and ambiguous narratives and identities (a relational view of the self). The remainder of this paper will explore this tension and how it subtly affects adult education practice, particularly practice based on critical self-reflection.

A Narrative Approach to
Adult Education Pedagogy

The narrative approach to understanding development and change has much in common with existing practices in adult education, especially those associated with reflection on experience. Furthermore there is certainly much common ground in the idea of the critical subject as one who maintains a permanent critique of him/herself in the practice and pursuit of liberty. But how does one's theorization of self-narration have an impact on pedagogical practices?

First, I would like to explore the implications of adopting a relational view of the self. It seems that such a view implies a certain attitude towards what critical self-reflection may achieve as a pedagogical tool. It implies for example, that there is no necessity to search for an invariant or definitive story. Indeed it would be overly rigid and prescriptive to develop a singular narrative which simply replaces an earlier, more dysfunctional narrative, because singular narratives restrain and limit the capacity to explore different relationships. The emphasis instead is on the indeterminacy of identity, the relativity of meaning, and the generation and exploration of a multiplicity of meanings. To return to Gergen and Kaye (1992), there is a "progression from learning new meanings, to developing new categories of meaning, to transforming one's premises about the nature of meaning itself" (p. 257). Under what conditions can such transformations occur? Anderson and Goolishian (1992) cite the following conditions:

- where learners have the experience of being heard
- where learners have their point of view and feelings understood
- where learners have feel themselves confirmed and accepted.

This involves a form of interested enquiry on behalf of the educator, one which opens premises for exploration. It also implies an openness to different ways of punctuating experience and a readiness to explore multiple perspectives and endorse their coexistence. Such interventions ostensibly enable learners to construct things from different viewpoints releasing them from the oppression of limiting narrative beliefs. Learners can be invited to: "find exceptions to their predominating experience; to view themselves as prisoners of a culturally inculcated story they did not create; to imagine how they might relate their experience to different people in their lives; to consider what response they might invite via their interactional proclivities; to relate what they imagine to be the experience of others close to them; to consider how they would experience their lives if they operated from different assumptions-how they might act, what resources they could call upon in different contexts; what new solutions might emerge; and to recall precepts once believed, but now jettisoned" (1992, p. 258).

On first glance this appears to be strikingly similar to existing theory and practice in adult education. Brookfield (1995) for example, regards critical reflection as "the hunting of assumptions of power and hegemony. The best way to unearth these assumptions is to look at what we do from as many unfamiliar angles as possible" (1995, p. 28). This appears to be totally compatible with Gergen and Kaye's approach to therapy, however when Brookfield moves on to propose ways of unearthing assumptions he begins by identifying "four critically reflective lenses," one of which is autobiography. But one's autobiography is not seen as something which is open to reinterpretation and re-authoring. Instead it is seen as something which needs to be "un-earthed" so as to expose its influence on our beliefs and practices as teachers: "Analyzing our autobiographies as learners has important implications for how we teach…the insights and meanings we draw from these deep experiences are likely to have a profound and long lasting influence…we may think we're teaching according to a widely accepted curricular or pedagogic model, only to find, on reflection, that the foundations of our practice have been laid in our autobiographies as learners" (1995, p. 31).

Note the emphasis here on autobiography as a foundation of practice, the uncovering of which leads to a better understanding and explanation for our otherwise uncritically accepted beliefs and commitments regarding teaching and learning. But this approach assumes a singular biography, which, however open to denial and distortion in the process of reflection, is nevertheless available to be "discovered." The pedagogical emphasis is therefore on the accurate rendering of one's autobiography, which invariably means addressing the distortions and denials blocking such an accurate rendition. The emphasis at the outset then is on discovery rather than creation: the questions posed are "Who am I?" and "Have I got it right?" and "What is the secret of my desire?" rather than "Is this rendering of experience/autobiography desirable?" and "What relationships can be invented or modulated through such a rendering of experience? It is the latter questions which are posed when adopting a relational view of the self. Although some of the teaching techniques may be similar on the surface (for example exploring alternative interpretations with other teachers/learners), the whole project is fundamentally different. For example, in exploring one's positionality as a teacher, the task is not to "discover" and problematise "who we are" or "how we are positioned" in terms of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, or ableness; but to explore multiple stories around each of these categories with a view to opening up new relations of power and authority (see Tisdell, 1998, for a slightly different treatment of positionality in post-structuralist feminist pedagogy).

Thus from a relational view the pedagogy of self reflection insists, not on discovering who one is, but on creating who one might become. But some critics have claimed that an extreme relational point of view rejects any standards by which to judge or evaluate what we are to become, and rejects the pursuit of any stable or coherent identity as being a normative goal.

But it is clearly possible to maintain a relational point of view so long as one's standards and evaluative criteria are problematised and open to reinscription. Similarly with the question of the pursuit of a coherent, continuous self as a normative

goal. Now in many adult education sites this is seen as indispensable to transformative (and thereby resistant) adult education practice. For example, courses designed to provide opportunities to explore indigenous "ways of knowing" are often based on the working assumption that there is a culture to be "discovered." Participants, in discovering their cultural heritage, are provided with a new anchoring point for their identity, an identity which had hitherto being fragmented by colonization. Now it is true that a relational point of view would avoid notions like "discovery" and it would reject the idea of a unitary, fixed, and coherent cultural identity. But it does not reject indigenous culture as meaningless, it simply insists that there is space for re-inscription; for the telling of new stories that have not yet been told – stories which are partial, hybrid and fragile (see Taylor, 1995). It is this opening up of possibilities which is the distinguishing feature of a pedagogy built on a relational view of the self.

Concluding Remarks

A conventional view of adult education as cultivating a self which is independent, rational, autonomous, and coherent, is no longer sustainable in a world characterized by difference and diversity. The problem with such a conventional view is that it is incompatible with inclusive educational practice. The need to take into account a plurality of perspectives demands a pedagogy which invites a multiplicity of self-accounts. A narrative approach which incorporates a relational view of the self, I argued, achieves this aim. It constitutes a fundamental shift in how learning for self-change is conceived and realized in the formulation of goals and purposes, and in everyday engagement with learners.

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