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Whose Questions Count? Fostering Pedagogies of Action Research in Adult Education

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Abstract: *Prevailing modes of instruction and inquiry privilege knowledge generated by academic elites. How might curriculum based on critical pedagogy and participatory research transform conventional educational institutions? Ongoing research challenges the relationship of educational institutions to social action.*

Whose questions count? If we consider published research in adult education, we might observe that most “questions that count” are those of scholars in the field. However, if our goal is movement toward a better world, then the locus of questioning shifts from scholars to normal people – people and communities with troubles, hopes, and dreams. In post-modern thought, the search for *the* right questions is outmoded. Perhaps our search for questions to drive research in the new century will lead us to explore the realities of most people on our planet. Outside of North America, Europe, and Australia, globalization increases disparity as it pushes the majority to expanding margins and the prosperous center shrinks. The WTO debacle in Seattle has catalyzed a shift in the rhetoric. Rhetorical shifts are not enough.

Who really benefits from research questions in adult education? Does not the person asking the question often benefit the most from finding the answer? Asking and answering questions *with* instead of *for* people is a difficult proposition for professors and graduate students in adult education. There is little respect, understanding, or reward for doing this in academe. So, do not tell your colleagues your intentions until you are hired, tenured, and promoted. And, do be careful about your teaching – if students control your classroom it may be misconstrued as chaos, abandonment, or worse. Is such cynicism warranted? We say we believe in the potential of learners to transform, but we often act as if university faculty and administrators are somehow exempt from this promise. Shame on us.

We can do better. But, who am I to speak? Just another privileged white male with an academic pedigree. Making countless mistakes, I have surely acted as *oppressor* more than I have identified with *the oppressed*. Despite inherent contradictions,

things can and must be said and things should be done. I am not qualified to judge your work or motives. But, I am glad to provoke you into a dialogue to consider these matters. From such dialogue, perhaps we can learn from each other’s journeys and struggles towards more just and critically reflective practice.

Critical pedagogy overturns dominant conceptions of what learning is. However, there is a significant gap in the research – the nature of critical pedagogy is not elucidated, and we have not developed models that tie that pedagogy to critical practice, linking research to action. This research seeks to develop a better-understood model of critical pedagogy of adult education, integrating critical pedagogy and participatory research practice. Freire’s pedagogy was about tying reflection to action – problem-posing helps adults learn in such a way that they are challenged to intervene together (Shugurensky, 1998). Subsequently, their actions uncover power dynamics while yielding intense personal transformation. Cunningham defines *critical pedagogy* as “the educational action which develops the ability of a group to critically reflect on their environment and to develop strategies to bring about democratic social change in that environment” (1993). We lack research on the effects of a *pedagogy of action* on adult learners, educational institutions, and communities. Few efforts have been studied in which a systematic curriculum has been developed at an educational institution for the express purpose of engaging the “non-poor” in critical reflection and action toward democratic social change.

I am working with learners to develop a curriculum for democratic social change at a seminary in the Philippines that wants to help churches address poverty. Learners are becoming participatory

researchers with local people to address concrete problems (Park, Brydon-Miller, Hall, & Jackson, 1993; Tandon, 1988). Critical pedagogy infuses group reflection into this learning process, helping seminarians question both their privilege in society and the larger political economy. The research seeks to build a critical pedagogy within the classroom and evaluate the impact on the seminary. The first step is creating a democratic classroom (Shor, 1996). Allow me to make some preliminary comments about my experience so far.

Growing critical pedagogy in a Philippine classroom can be challenging (Ortigas, 1990). Educational institutions are largely conservative. Out of respect, deferential students rarely question their professors. Respecting cultural values, while collapsing the social distance that blocks critique, is a difficult balancing act. I asked participants in one course to construct the syllabus. Four working groups generated goals, classroom processes, learning activities (assignments), and evaluation procedures. Groups facilitate class sessions and select readings. As a co-learner, I try to assume the role of catalyst, resource person, and networker – as needed, I become facilitator, advisor, and guide. I try to create a safe space for open discourse, individual and group reflection. So far, participants are slowly becoming more astute observers of oppression in their society but have yet to own much of it themselves. Social class differences still make doing *for* easier than doing *with*. I also facilitated a faculty development workshop on philosophy of education. The workshop and some conversations have led some professors to experiment with democracy in their classrooms. Others are simply trying to increase the extent and quality of participation in their courses. Evaluating institutional effects will be difficult.

Could critical reflection and action toward democratic social change really become currency of higher education? Could critical pedagogy influence curricular reform and educational policy in institutions? This study explores the relationship between academic institutions and social action. If social change were part of the curriculum, would it threaten existing power structures and perceptions of authority maintained by the faculty and administration? Can critical pedagogy be sustained in adult education practice within a mainstream academic institution? How can adult educators overcome obstacles to critical pedagogy? We need more research, more models, and more compelling stories about what this pedagogy looks like. This research aims to generate and tell such a story.

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