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### Recommended Citation

Penner, Mary Anne Phelan (2001). "Helping Adult Learners Overcome Alienation: What Can I Do if Most of My Learners/Participants Are Not Pre-literate, Brazilian Peasant Farmers?," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2001/papers/54>

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## **Helping Adult Learners Overcome Alienation: What Can I Do if Most of My Learners/Participants Are Not Pre-literate, Brazilian Peasant Farmers?**

Mary Anne Phelan Penner, Ph.D. USA

**Abstract: This theory-building research paper describes the ideal environmental framework in which to help adult learners overcome alienation. It includes the theoretical background and tools for assessing any participatory group environment for its proximity to this ideal.**

### **The Theoretical Background**

When the idea of being a world famous movie star causes you to change your name, the color of your hair, your figure, your lifestyle, your biographical history, and when it controls who your friends and lovers are and what you say and do not say to people, you have to have become estranged from who you truly are. When the idea of defending geographical, economic and political turf for the sake of your street gang causes you to maim and kill others, you have to have become estranged from yourself, the society, and from the products of your own work and actions. When the idea of new possessions causes you to shop and buy obsessively, non-human objects have to have become estranged from you, separated you from yourself, and controlled you.

The movie star, the gang member and the consumer exemplify people who have become alienated. That is, certain processes in society have caused the estrangement of each of these individuals from his/her *self*, *social relations*, *work-products*, and non-human objects (Marx, 1844; Israel, 1971).

Each has transformed certain social structures into a reality of ideas that estranges him/her. Alienation theorists such as Joachim Israel (1971) look to a process called "reification" for this translation of social processes and structures into alienating realities. Reification endows a transcending reality and truth to that which may not be real or truthful. In the case of the consumer, consumer goods have become reified in his/her consciousness and have acquired for the buyer a transcendent status. That is, commodities have an independent, controlling function beyond the individual which estranges the person from his/her self and from those very objects that began the estrangement. This individual has translated society's merchandise into an alienating reality.

We are all inventors and constructors of our knowledge. Reality has a plastic character; that is, each actor stretches and shapes it for him/herself. Reification occurs in alienated people through the acquisition and construction of knowledge, too; the alienated have apprehended and mentally constructed ideas and social structures as foreign, alien, reified entities.

These alien ideas are what the constructivists call "epistemological fallibilisms" (Schwandt, 1994, p. 125). They are acquired as we "invent concepts, models and schemes to make sense of experience" (p. 125). They are distortions acquired along with knowledge during these processes. They are random misconceptions or incomplete perception of fact, or systematic [and societal] biases" (p. 126). Thus, the process of inventing or constructing knowledge is distortion prone, and these fallibilisms continue to accumulate as people "test and modify their constructions in the light of new experience"(p. 126). Throughout the process of inventing, constructing, testing and modifying knowledge, people embrace or passively accept these distortions. We accept these distortions whenever we are *not actively involved* in those processes of inventing, constructing, testing and modifying knowledge. We accept what we would not accept if we were actively critical of knowledge as we acquired it.

Given a lifetime of acquiring these knowledges, we have built up knowledge that has a separate, transcendent existence which oppresses and controls us by persuading us that there are certain things we cannot do, certain things we must do, and certain things of which we must be afraid. With a mind full of these alien knowledges, developed over a lifetime of passively absorbing them, we become separated and estranged from ourselves, from our work products, from our social relations, and from non-human objects, that is, from our surroundings. Alienation, then, is a matter of being estranged from our knowledge of ourselves, from our knowledge of the products of our work, from our knowledge of our social relations, and from our knowledge of non-human objects.

As a consequence of our alienation from our knowledge, we suffer painful feelings of powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness (lawlessness), social isolation, and self-estrangement (Seeman, 1959; Israel, 1971; Rosner and Mittelberg, 1989). Consequently, individuals suffering from these feelings associated with alienation will take their pain out on society and themselves. Alienation, and the profound discomforts spawned by it, have been linked to workplace sabotage, hate crimes, self-destructive behaviors, and, even in rare cases, suicide (Buber Agassi, 1991; Schweitzer, 1992).[Extreme examples of this progression from faulty knowledge acquisition, to feelings of powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, social isolation and self-estrangement, to violent actions, are found in several recent, tragic events such as the Columbine High School massacre. I believe that the murderous, suicidal actions taken by the two young men were manifestations of their being estranged from their knowledge of themselves, their knowledge of the products of their work (actions), their knowledge of their social relations, and their knowledge of their surroundings.]

### **Overcoming Alienation**

Reversing this progressive process comes through the development of what Jürgen Habermas (1971) calls emancipatory knowledge. This is knowledge that is free from alienated and alienating understandings. That is, it is knowledge generated through our work identifying the biases in our oppressive visions of reality. Once we have the skill of generating emancipatory knowledge, which is to be practiced continuously, we are restored to our rightful place as authors of our own world view.

Habermas's (1971) knowledge typology has three classes. Emancipatory knowledge is the third category. The others are informational and interpretative. We have become alienated by passively accepting and absorbing the latter two forms throughout our lives.. Informational or scientific knowledge, while crucial to human survival and the quality of life, is subject to the influence of dominant interests, chiefly the interests of those who produce it. Interpretative or hermeneutic knowledge, sometimes called the "understanding science" is, as all translation is, at risk of reproducing or passing on or replicating the social order. Our passively imbibed knowledges in the informational and interpretative domains are often in the interest of others.

In the case examples at the beginning of this essay, the movie star, the gang member and the consumer have all passively absorbed interpretative knowledges. Each has passively imbibed society's values and understandings. The movie star has misinterpreted and overvalued the notion of movie stardom, the gang member has misunderstood the importance of his organization and the consumer has passively imbibed a significance to society's goods, and all three have given these misinterpretations a transcendent, controlling, and alienating status. Arguably, because of the hazards inherent in interpretative knowledges, these are the ones that are most frequently faulty, reified and alienating, but, because it is not possible to know for sure, all knowledge must be critically assessed if we are to ensure the development of emancipatory knowledge and overcome alienation.

De-alienating emancipatory knowledge (Habermas, 1971) comes from the work of critiquing our informational and interpretative knowledges. At its most basic, critiquing knowledge is the questioning of its assumptions, presumptions, and norms. By continuously examining and critiquing our knowledge, we first reduce and then eliminate our estrangement from the knowledge, gain personal ownership of it, and thus overcome our alienation. The perfect environment to develop emancipatory knowledge would be one where we are free to critique all our knowledge. Paulo Freire's (1972) powerful pedagogy assists the alienated in overcoming oppressive knowledge. However, Freire's environment is complicated by the integration of his strategy to overcome illiteracy. Implementers of his approach may find it difficult to separate the literacy education from the de-alienation aspects of his paradigm. In cases where literacy is not an issue, Freire's model is inappropriate and impractical.

Habermas (1973), on the other hand, has proposed the "ideal speech situation," which has the sole purpose of overcoming the oppressions of faulty knowledge and thus in freeing individuals of alienation. White (1988) has translated the tenets of Habermas's ideal speech situation from German to English.[White's (1988) book has information about the location of the original German version.] The English translation of the "ideal speech situation" is as follows. For groups of two or more:

- a) Each [participant] who is capable of speech and action is allowed to participate in discourse.
  - i) Each is allowed to call into question any proposal.
  - ii) Each is allowed to express his attitudes, wishes, and needs.

b) No speaker is allowed to hinder by compulsion-whether arising from inside the discourse or outside it-making use of the rights secure under a. and b. (White, 1988, pg. 56)

The primary component here is the individual's critique of knowledge. Four other components are essential to support and validate this critique. The five elements of the "ideal speech situation" (Habermas, 1971) are: 1) *freedom from internal constraints*; 2) *freedom from external constraints*; 3) *self-reflective critique of knowledge*; 4) *utilization of that criticized knowledge*; and 5) *consistency of the environment with communicative rationality and consensus-building*.

*Freedom from both internal and external constraints*, such as an internal leader or external manager, ensures that the participants are free to critique any and all of their beliefs and understandings. There is only one constraint allowed in the dialogue and that is the power of the superior argument. *Self-reflective critique of knowledge* ensures that each individual does the work of examining and questioning. *Utilization of that criticized knowledge* ensures that the participants apply their self-reflective critiqued beliefs and understandings through discussion and action. *Consistency with communicative rationality and consensus-building*, combined, ensure that the group be one that willingly works toward a rational, good society and mutual understanding.

Without *freedom from both internal and external constraints*, the knowledge that is critiqued and the critiquing process would be under someone else's power and control, and we know that the interests of others caused our alienation in the first place. Without *self-reflective critique* of all the knowledge domains, we would not be examining the knowledge that alienated us. Without *utilization of that criticized knowledge* in discussion and action, we would merely be empowered or have the potential for being de-alienated, but not actually be de-alienated. For de-alienation to occur, we need to use our new knowledges by actively testing and modifying our new knowledge constructions. Without consistency with *communicative rationality and consensus building*, we have a group of individuals who have closed their minds. This closed mindedness suggests an irrationality in the proceedings.

### **Implications for Practice: Assessing Your Environment**

The adult educator, or anyone in a group of two or more, can assess his/her setting's proximity to the ideal by overlaying the model's five components on any participatory learning environment, such as a work place or other educational setting. However, there follows a brief description of a set of tools or instruments which may be helpful in assessing each of these individual elements in any learning environment for its proximity to the ideal.

Initially though, the adults may want to assess whether or not they are alienated. In keeping with the spirit of constraint-free critiquing of all knowledge in Habermas's (1973) "ideal speech situation," this assessment would ideally be a group research project. Vallas (1988) has developed a survey instrument to assess the level of alienation workers incurred with the influx of technology into the workplace. With some minor re-write of his survey instrument to customize it for the desired group environment, the adults can assess their level of alienation prior to discussing and agreeing to make any modifications in the five components.

In assessing the proximity of the first component, *freedom from internal constraint*, to the ideal, the issue is the relationship between the first line leader and the group. Although most groups have a leader, the ideal is to have a completely democratic group where all participants are equal in the dialogue. For the internal constraint assessment, Arnstein's (1971) Ladder, consisting of "manipulation, therapy [also manipulation], informing, consultation, placation, partnership, delegated power and citizen power" (p. 70), can be used to determine the level of this constraint imposed by the leader. "Manipulation" on the Ladder is the most constrained, and "citizen power" is the least constrained and closest to the ideal. Arguably, the leader imposes only one possible internal constraint, but the most influential and powerful one.

To assess the level of *freedom from external constraints* on the group, Peter Easton's (1983) "diverse forms" (p. 18) hierarchy of participatory environments may be used. The diverse forms are "collective bargaining, joint consultation, job enlargement or job enrichment, co-determination, worker ownership and self-management," (p. 18) where dickering or collective bargaining has the most constraints from external sources, and self-management is closest to the ideal. A determination can be made of where an environment is on this scale through the use of the dictionary to define Easton's terms, and through observation of the group. This process should answer the question of how much freedom is allowed by management from outside the group.

In assessing the *self-reflective critique of knowledge*, the standard is for each individual in the group to be questioning the assumptions, presumptions and norms of all knowledge not only informational, technical knowledges, but also interpretative, hermeneutic knowledges. The issue in assessing the *utilization of criticized knowledge* is a matter of checking that the participants are having a "reflective conversation with the situation" (Schon, 1983, p. 268). Closest to the ideal would be if the participants are given the opportunity to act on the insights derived from their critical reflections. Are they acting as "reflective practitioners" who are having a continuous, reflective interaction with the situation?

A *communicatively rational* environment has an overall purpose and philosophy of working together toward understanding and non-manipulative practical ends. If these aspects of the environment are present, then the environment is communicatively rational and closest to the ideal. *Consensus* is actually instrumental to the realization of communicative rationality. Clearly, consensus does not have to be continuous, but a building process whose purpose is mutual understanding. To assess consensus, the observer need only answer the question, is it a consensus-building group or isn't it?

### **Implications for Practice: A Demonstration of the Assessment Process**

Now, we can see that Habermas has set the bar extremely high in his ideal, participatory, democratic environment for dialogue and action. Most environments do not reach this ideal. However, happily, efforts such as participatory research have the potential to be close to the ideal. Horton (1990) describes one such effort involving a group of Appalachian Mountain citizens experiencing a housing shortage. The citizens began their research into the problem and its causes by questioning who owned the land. They democratically selected their own leaders/spokespeople and the leaders imposed few *internal constraints* on the participants. The

"citizen power" rung on Arnstein's (1971) Ladder best describes this component in the endeavor. This participatory effort appeared to be at the level of Easton's (1983) "self-management" in relation to *external constraints* because the research was fully controlled by the participants.

The informational and interpretative domains of knowledge were open to critique. In fact, the participants invited Horton's Highlander School staff to help them learn additional research skills so that more knowledge could be uncovered and opened to critique. However, one area that may not meet the highest standards of the ideal is that all of the participants may not have been *self-reflective in their critique* of all of this knowledge. In order to best determine this, the assessment would have to be made on site, rather than through a case example in the literature. The purpose of this effort was critical social inquiry, which is a reflective interaction with the situation, and thus a utilization of the criticized knowledge. Since social justice was the goal of the group, arguably, it was a case of communicative rationality in action. Finally, according to Horton's (1990) report of the project, consensus building was present. He also indicated that one of several successful outcomes of this research was that the group helped to defeat state legislation that would have reduced the already low tax rate for the major corporations that owned the land.

Imagine you were engaged in this engrossing, near-ideal participatory social inquiry experience, where you and all your fellow participants were in a constraint-free, consensus-building, critically reflective interaction with the situation, could you be suffering from any of the alienated feelings of powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, social isolation or self-estrangement whatsoever?

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