

# Adult Education and the Struggle for Knowledge and Power: Practical Action in a Critical Tradition

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**La Verneda-Sant Martí Adult Education Center:  
Adult Education and the Struggle for Knowledge and Power:  
Practical Action in a Critical Tradition**

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**Abstract: Along with others we argue that practical space can be found in nearly all forms of adult education for the redistribution of knowledge and power. The purpose of the paper is to describe a way of understanding practical action in a world structured by the inequitable distribution of knowledge and power.**

### **An Issue of Practice**

It is no longer a secret that adult education has moved to the center of much of our institutional, cultural, economic, and political lives. Businesses spend billions on training; legislators mandate policy on work and education; social movements throughout the world depend on adult education. Less obvious is how crucial adult education has become to the inequitable distribution of knowledge and power in terms of who benefits from such distributions and who should be benefiting but typically do not. Where do we adult educators fit in this struggle for knowledge and power? Put more bluntly, whose side are we on and how should we act? The purpose of the paper is to construct a politically-pitched and normatively-inspired model for understanding the context of adult education practice and to present our understanding of the practical action required to negotiate and transform these conditions.

In the real world, of course, people solve problems; yet theory is helpful for reminding us of what we care about and what we hope to accomplish (Forester, 1989). Likewise, theory should not be seen as positing some transcendent truth but providing plausible grounds for politically-pitched and ethically-illuminated practical action (Harvey, 1996). To practically confront the world of inequity, we need to understand the way it is, have a vision for what it should be, and have strategies for achieving our vision (Livingston, 1983). In that sense we align ourselves with others (Newman, 1999; Walters, 1996; Youngman, 1996) who maintain that in nearly all forms of adult education, practical space can be found for the redistribution of knowledge and power. The model of adult education practice proposed here provides an interpretive lens for understanding practical action in a world structured by the inequitable distribution of knowledge and power. Thus the paper represents a call to action and the construction of a research agenda for furthering this analysis and developing strategies for changing such distributions.

### **Choosing Sides**

In everyday practice, of course, we all know that the opportunities and obstacles of practice demand we take sides in terms of who we believe should benefit from our efforts as adult

educators. In this regard, three different traditions in adult education literature have addressed whose side we should be on and how we should act (Cervero & Wilson, 1999). One tradition, referred to as "romancing the adult learner," proclaims always to be on the learner's side. Yet, even in the earnest willingness to be helpful, practitioners in this tradition see the "political as personal" and thus end up typically supporting the status quo. A second tradition, the "political is practical," recognizes the role of power in practice, but takes no deliberative stance on how power should be used, for whom, or to what ends.

A third strand has emerged (some would say re-emerged) in adult education to say distinctly whose side we should be on. This tradition, often referred to as the critical tradition, is clear about the stakes of practice being the redistribution of power. While the debates continue as to its origins and historical course, certainly the current conversation owes a significant starting point to Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), whose echoing has continued to inspire numerous critical analyses since then (e.g., Collins, 1991; Cunningham, 1989; Hart, 1991; Hayes & Colin, 1994; Law, 1988; Newman, 1994, 1999; Welton, 1987, 1995). The important contribution of this critical tradition is its continuing analysis of how to understand adult education's role in the production of benefits, the distribution of power, and the constitution of social life. These analyses have not only made it clear what the stakes are but also whose side adult educators should champion. Thus there is a continuing cry for recognizing and relieving oppression, often through fostering emancipatory participation. As others have indicated (Apple, 1996; Gore, 1993, Walters, 1996), however, we need to know more about the "micropractices" necessary for negotiating power and embodying democratic traditions. Recent empirical work has clearly indicated that adult educators actively negotiate power relations and interests to intentionally shape who benefits from their adult education work (Cervero & Wilson, 1994; 1998; 2001). Thus our effort here is to theorize emerging lines of practical work (e.g., Fenwick, 2000; Gore, 1993; Hart, 2001; hooks, 1994; Inglis, 1998; Sheard, 1998), which seek to intentionally alter who benefits from adult education.

### **Practical Action Within a Critical Tradition**

In our everyday practice we always answer the questions of who benefits from our work and in what ways (Cervero & Wilson, 2001). By aligning ourselves with the critical tradition we are saying there are specific benefits we should pursue, namely, the redistribution of knowledge and power. To do that we have to theorize the social conditions we both work in and create in order to understand how to practically pursue such redistributions. Thus our understanding of the context of our work figures prominently in understanding what we can do with that work. To respond, we propose a model that has three dimensions. To depict what politically-informed, ethically-illuminated practical action looks like within a critical tradition, we must first see adult education *relationally* as deeply embedded in and constitutive of wider social settings in which it is both participant and embodiment; second, we describe that relationship between adult education and society specifically as the *struggle* for knowledge and power; and third we see adult educators as social activists within a democratic tradition who *broker* knowledge and power in order to intentionally alter adult education's dominant patterns of distributions.

*Understanding Adult Education Relationally*

Asking the practical question of who benefits means also asking how we understand social realities and our roles in creating them. Much adult education (particularly American) is typically viewed in humanist, psychological, and instrumental terms. Following on the work of Williams (1961), Giddens (1979), and Apple (1990; 1996), we see *adult education in relational terms as a social activity* "tied to the larger arrangement of institutions which apportion resources so that particular groups and classes have historically been helped while others have been less adequately treated" (Apple, 1990, p. 10). Thus we fundamentally see adult education as a reciprocal social process: not only is the practice of adult education a precipitate of general social relations, its practice simultaneously helps to produce those social relationships. So, rather than limiting our understanding of the context of adult education to humanist traditions of psychological development and expressions of facilitative professional expertise, we propose instead that these social relations are reciprocal in that the effects go in both directions. First, the social, economic, political, cultural, racial, and gendered power relations which structure all action in the world are played out in adult education. These systems of power are an inescapable facet of social reality and almost always asymmetrical in that they privilege some people and disadvantage others. Regardless of its institutional and social location or the ideological character of its content, any policy, program, or practice of adult education represents this embeddedness in a structuring (but not pre-determined) social reality. In a real sense, the power relations that structure our lives together do not stop at the doors of our classrooms or institutions that provide adult education. Second, in the other direction, our education efforts always play a role in maintaining or reconstructing these systems of power (see Giddens, 1979). Through our educational actions as policy analysts, programmers, or teachers we continually reproduce or change these societal power relations; that is, our policy, program, and practice actions provide more life chances for some adults and fewer for others. As we have argued elsewhere (Cervero & Wilson, 1994, 1998), adult educators both *act in* educational situations to *produce* instrumental effects (e.g., substantive negotiations such as conducting needs assessments) and *act on* those situations either to *reproduce* or *change* the systems of power structuring those situations (i.e., meta-negotiations).

Understanding the context of adult education relationally and reciprocally allows us to recognize that adult learners exist in the structurally defined hierarchies of everyday life and that these differences matter at a most fundamental level. Thus, although the individual psychology of the adult learner remains an important dimension of adult education practice, we argue that the more significant dimension is that adult learners enter this educational process marked by their location within larger systems of power and privilege that have shaped their experience. Like adult learners, adult educators also enter educational practice as participants in larger systems of power and privilege, and their actions are both enabled and constrained by their place in these systems. In order to understand the nature of adult education practice and what is at stake when we do our work, we have to see these relational and reciprocal connections between the systems of power in society we embody and the way in which our work produces and reproduces these systems. Thus adult education is neither marginalized nor inconsequential as often supposed but central to the constitution and reproduction of social life. A relational analysis enables us to see the reciprocal role adult education plays in the distribution of knowledge and power.

*Adult Education as the Struggle for Knowledge and Power: The Politics of Practice*

Within this relational context of production and reproduction, we see *adult education as a site for the struggle for knowledge and power* because it has become a central component of social life (even as we as a professional class may be diminishing). In the "politics of practice" adult education always benefits some groups more than others, and in structural terms it typically reinforces the way things are (Rubenson, 1989). If power relations provide the context for action, then the politics of practice has to do with the means by which adult education as a social and political activity produces and reproduces access to and the distribution of knowledge and power. Thus in our policies, programs, and practices, the struggle for knowledge and power is always at stake. This is no small claim, for adult educators are used to imagining themselves as marginalized and powerless (not inaccurate as far as it goes, yet such perspective fails to see the function of adult *education* in constituting social reality by only considering our role in that functioning). Once we have situated adult education relationally within the wider society and economy, we must then locate it "on the ground" in the material world. In a number of settings we have been able to demonstrate that no matter how seemingly technical or facilitative or esoteric the activity of adult educators seems to be, adult education practice routinely represents situations in which people with specific interests actively use adult education to not only maintain or transform relations of power but also to specifically affect who benefits from their activity (Cervero & Wilson 1994; 1996; 1998; 2001). Behind our professional demeanor of technical expertise and neutral facilitation, behind our espoused humanist ways of tending to the adult learner lie these questions for which we must take responsibility: Who gets to learn what, and who gets to decide who learns what? By deciding such questions, which are directly linked to societal systems of power, we not only enact these systems of power but also affect who gains from the use of adult education and who does not. Thus there is no neutral or innocent space from which to "practice" or do adult education, for all spaces in which adult education is enacted represent the confluence of systems of power which shape attempts to distribute the benefits of knowledge differentially.

Seeing adult education as a struggle for knowledge and power recognizes that there are multiple interests at stake in any adult education activity. Because adult education is about many things (not just adults learning), there is almost always conflict (even when we choose not to see it) among the agendas of the many people who might benefit from the efforts of adult educators. Thus, in the struggles that constitute and define the political practice of adult education, negotiating power and interests is what adult educators do (Cervero & Wilson, 1994, 1998). It is out of these struggles that adult educators negotiate a particular purpose, content, and audience for any given educational effort. In negotiating these conflicts, those responsible for adult education address these perennial political questions about their efforts: Who benefits and in what ways? There is no neutral or objective response to these questions. As a central dynamic of practice, our perspective on power in practice sees people acting in struggle as the focus of attention.

### *Adult Educators as Knowledge-Power Brokers: The Practice of Politics*

Adult education matters, or else why would any one care about it. The evidence is overwhelming that many do care because of the struggle for controlling its benefits. So, what is it we negotiate and negotiate about? Within the broad notion of social construction, we negotiate the production and reproduction of social practices. Specifically, following on our earlier work, we see adult

educators as negotiating power and interests in seeking to redistribute knowledge and power (using substantive and meta-negotiation practices). In the "practice of politics," we position adult educators as social activists who directly intervene in people's lives to determine who benefits from adult education and in what ways. Asking the question "Who benefits?" is an important tool for understanding the politics of adult education in any setting. Out of the struggles that define the politics of practice comes a specific adult education policy, program, or practice. Thus through their actions adult educators answer the ethical question of who should benefit from their work. At the heart of practice, we must understand that every adult educator is a social activist, regardless of his or her particular vision of society. We cannot be released nor escape from our responsibility for affecting the wider world in which we live.

Given the relational dynamics of struggling for knowledge and power, there is no politically innocent position from which to act; that is, we must say whose side we are on and what we intend to do. Ensclosed in the critical tradition, we characterize *adult educators as knowledge-power brokers* who intentionally seek to alter the distribution of knowledge and power in order to change who historically and typically have benefited the most from adult education. We describe such action as strategic (as opposed to instrumental or procedural) because the knowledge-power-brokering image indicates a willingness to name who should benefit and takes responsible action that redistributes knowledge and power within a social justice context. In such a politics of power, we must see what matters: that the struggle for knowledge and power is about the constitution of individual lives and the society we create. In that struggle for constituting social life, we must create opportunities for taking control of and changing our lives and the conditions in which we live.

### **The Practice of Possibility**

So what does practical action within a critical tradition look like? As a knowledge-power broker, the adult educator sees what is at stake and is willing to act to change who benefits and who should benefit from adult education. Such a practice of possibility in adult education depends upon two significant issues. First, many of us recognize that much adult education practice tends to benefit those already endowed because of their location in our systems of power and privilege. Struggle ensues because those in privileged positions typically are unwilling to share the material and social benefits of power and knowledge. Naming and aiding who should benefit requires a clear ethical sense. In that regard, we invoke the critical tradition in adult education that says that social justice is what adult can and should be about. It's an important tradition, rich in situational strategies, that never loses sight of the central question of social justice in enabling people to take control of their lives. Second, a practice of possibility depends upon the following: by understanding that adult education represents a central social arena for vying for knowledge and power we can see that the political practice of adult education is about changing some part of the world, specifically about what we do to change knowledge-power relations. In that regard, we argue that because we cannot change what we don't see we need a new way to see in order to act to address injustices of the world. That premise depends upon this: Because knowledge and power are socially constructed, they are disruptable and changeable. We can change who benefits, and furthermore we have a responsibility to change our practices to fit our views of justness.

Because we live in a world where power and knowledge are continually negotiated, adult education offers hope and possibility to many people. In order to realize these possibilities for creating a more just world, we need to recognize how power operates even through the most extraordinary as well as mundane educational activities. We believe that by bringing greater visibility to the political and ethical choices, contradictions, and consequences of adult education, we can better understand how to create educational practices, programs, and policies that provide opportunities for people to develop and exercise more control over their social, cultural, economic, and political lives.

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