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"Our hopes and dreams enrich its every corner" : Adult Education with an Africentric Focus

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Adult Education with an Africentric Focus

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Abstract: This paper addresses the ways in which Africentricity contributes to adult education's goal of creating a socially just world and specifically to a graduate adult education/lifelong learning degree program within a Nova Scotian university context.

In North America, when students graduate from formal adult education programs they will likely be familiar with several (mainly white) male theorists, some (mainly white) women theorists and perhaps a handful of theorists who take non-Eurocentric perspectives. This paper will address the ways in which a non-Eurocentric, namely Africentricity, contributes to adult education's goal of creating a more equitable world and specifically to a graduate degree program in adult education/ lifelong learning within a Nova Scotian university context. In part one of the paper I discuss Africentricity in adult education and in part two I provide a very brief Nova Scotia historical context before describing the Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU) masters degree program.

Part One

Depending on whom I am speaking with, responses to the word "Africentric" range from an uncomfortable "hmmm" with eye contact sliding away, "What is that exactly?" to "Oh, I'd like to hear more about that" and several responses in between. I suppose the initial reaction of discomfort/ uncertainty is based on an incorrect assumption that Africentricity is positioned in binary opposition to Eurocentrism such that certain Black experiences and perspectives are privileged, thus marginalizing all others. Perhaps "Africentricity" reminds people of race and in adult education classrooms there is often uneasiness in speaking about race[2]. Perhaps there is an assumption that an Africentric perspective is "useful" for students of African descent but not for students of other racial backgrounds. I address these assumptions through considering the question: *In what ways can an Africentric perspective contribute to adult education degree programs?*

What is Africentricty?

Africentricity (also referred to as Afrocentricty) is multi-dimensional. There are several understandings of Africentricity and several theorists who have developed different strands, some which have been woven together over time and some loosely tied in. Asante's (2003, p. 2) quote is helpful as it offers a definition that encapsulates the complexity of Africentricity. He states,

> [It] is a mode of thought and action in which the centrality of African interests, values, and perspectives predominate. In regards to theory, it is the placing of

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[1]. This is a line in the poem "Preston" by David Woods (1990, p. 13). Preston (North and East), NS is one of the oldest communities of African-Canadians in Canada.

[2] Dei (1998) suggests that through "the cult of individualism" there is a denial of the importance of race and "the discourse of plurality conveniently helps avoid the discomfort of speaking of race" (p. 203).

African people in the centre of analysis of African phenomena. … [I]n terms of action and behavior, it is a devotion to the idea that what is in the best interest of African consciousness is at the heart of ethical behavior. … [It] is to be against all forms of oppression, racism, classism, homophobia, patriarchy, child abuse, pedophilia, and white racial dominance. (Asante, 2003, p. 2)

Theorists such as Henry (1991) and Dei (1994, 1995) view the Africentric conceptual system not as exclusively Black or African, but a "journey toward wholeness which requires seeing the world not Black or white, but in its full spectrum" (Ntutela, 1995, p. 70). The "centric" in Afri*centric*ity is not conceptualized as a dualistic opposition of centre/margin rather it is to recognize that everyone is at the centre of his/her experience (Aptheker, 1989) and of any discipline. Africentricity recognizes other centres.

It places all world cultures on an equal footing... posits that all world cultures, not just Europeans, have contributed to modern civilization... poses the challenge for a model ... in which pluralism exists without hierarchy…(CACE, 2006, para 2)

Although the concept of Africentricity in adult education is still relatively under theorized, there is a growing body of literature (e.g. Schiele, 1994; Alfred, 2000, Bernard et al, 2000; Brookfield, 2003, 2005; Merriweather Hunn, 2004) in which the links between Africentricity and adult education are discussed.

A Critical Lens

Africentricity provides a lens in which we are "no longer …looking whitely through a tunnel lit with the artificial beams of Europe" (Asante, 2003, p. 3). An Africentric perspective provides an analysis and interpretation of daily life from the perspective of African people as subjects rather than objects on the fringes of world experiences (Asante, 1988; Hilliard, 1998; Wilson, 1998; Ashanti, 2003). For Asante (2003), through an Africentric perspective, "all things old become new and a transformation in people's attitudes, beliefs, values and behaviors create, *inter alia*, a revolutionary perspective on all facts" (p. 3). An example of how an Africentric feminist model can be used as a lens through which to critically examine models of adult education theory is provided by Alfred (2000) who analyses two major concepts of adult learning: andragogy and self-directed learning. Alfred concludes that both of these concepts "disregard the social construction of knowledge… ignore the politics of positionality and their influence on the teaching and learning dynamics in the classroom" (p. 4) and support the idea of a universal design strategy or theoretical model for all adult learners.

The Importance of History

In commenting on Freire's work, West (cited in McClaren and Leonard, 1993, p. xii) highlights the criticality of history,

[It is] a unique fusion of social theory, moral outrage and political praxis… [it] constitutes a kind of pedagogical politics of conversation in which *objects of history constitute themselves as active subjects of history* ready to make a fundamental difference in the quality of the lives they individually and collectively live. (emphasis added)

This is reinforced by Asante (2003) who declares, if, as a people, you have been "exploited, discriminated, oppressed, humiliated, and assassinated" your political

doctrine must reflect that reality (p. 44). Aboriginal adult educators have been making this point for decades. Foley & Flowers (1992) in their analysis of Aboriginal adult education in the Australian context reassert what Canadian Aboriginal leaders (e.g. Indian Tribes of Manitoba, 1971, p. 116) have been demanding, which is that any design and delivery of adult education must be historically contextualized and directly related to the goal of self-determination centering on the political realities of Aboriginal peoples. Self-determination in addressing the educational needs, the historical and the political realities of African-Canadians in Nova Scotia is the goal articulated in the BLAC (1994) *Report on Education* (discussed below). Historical analyses from many perspectives inspires us to transform our world to be a better place, acknowledges the contributions of all peoples to civilization, art, philosophy, culture, science, etc., and reminds us that history did not begin for marginalized peoples only with contact with Europeans.

Africentricity in an Adult Education Classroom: An Additive Approach
        More than a critical 'lens', how might Africentricity be put into practice in a formal adult education program? Brookfield (2005) provides a vignette where the instructor of an adult education program includes a unit on Africentricity to "deliberately challenge the liberal/progressive hegemony" (p. 102). Brookfield describes how this particular perspective falls flat unlike the more commonly expected units on workplace learning and humanist adult education. Brookfield notes that the group of students responsible for researching and presenting on the topic of Africentricism face difficulties in locating key texts in their library and while students enthuse about the other topics, make connections and find applicability of the mainstream theories of andragogy, the learning organization, and self-directed learning, the Africentric concepts and practices are dismissed as inapplicable to the primarily white or Asian contexts within which they work. Time and questions devoted to Africentrism pale in comparison to the other topics. Brookfield goes on to explain that this is an example of repressive tolerance, which is "tolerance, in the name of impartiality, fairness or evenhandedness, of intolerable ideologies and practices and the consequent marginalization of efforts for democratic social change" (p. 104). Repressive tolerance ensures the continuation of the system by allowing just enough challenge "to convince people that they live in a truly open society, while maintaining the system's structural inequality" (Brookfield, 2005, p. 104).
        The vignette spawned several questions for me, such as: How is Africentricity: brought into this course – e.g. through an "additive approach" (Banks, 1994)?; situated/isolated in a Eurocentric-secured setting?; developed given the lack of important key texts?; positioned in a historical context?; impacted by the instructor's and the students' positionalities and subjectivities? When "integrated" in this way, does Africentricity challenge the liberal/progressive hegemony or reinforce it? Does it allow the adult educator to brush his/her palms together and say, We've accommodated that difference now let us get back to our 'regular' curriculum, without addressing issues of power, equity and justice? Does this example and others like it provide support for reluctant adult educators to try to avoid 'controversial' 'unpopular' topics/ perspectives?
        Newman (2007, p. 63) suggests, "Adult education is tough business, and ... the adult educator has a right, perhaps a duty, to adopt a position and point out harsh realities". More than that, adult educators take/have taken direct action to address harsh realities, social injustice/inequities. I believe that in doing this work (the "tough business" of adult education) adult educators must do more than engage their students in a gentle

tapping on the "shell" of Eurocentrism. In the face of North America's ugly historical and present treatment of Aboriginal peoples, those of African descent, and others in minority and marginalized groups a mere nod toward other perspectives will not do. One of Brookfield's practical suggestions is "to construct a whole program or curriculum that focuses only on marginalized ideas" (Brookfield, 2005, p. 113). What would adult education look like if Africentricity was not merely an 'added on' topic to a course but was the focus for a whole masters degree program?

Part Two

The Masters of Education in Lifelong Learning with a Focus on Africentricity
Nova Scotia's history of African-Canadian settlements date back to the 1700s when Black slaves were sold in Halifax and during the Loyalist period (1775-1783) when over 3000 free Blacks or former slaves came to Nova Scotia (Pachai & Bishop, 2006). The history of African-Canadians includes themes of resistance and adult learning pioneers and feminists (Moreau, 1990; Hamilton, 1993; Bernard et al, 2000; Pachai & Bishop, 2006) as they challenged the oppression experienced in the education system (segregated schools were dismantled in 1960, [BLAC, 1994]), in churches, in accessing housing, land, employment, theatre seats and cemetery plots, and in some areas such as Africville water and sewage systems. A more recent occurrence, the racial tensions between Black and White students at Cole Harbour High in Dartmouth in 1989, led to a number of significant outcomes. One outcome was the establishment of the Black Learners Advisory Committee (BLAC) which over a period of 5 years researched the history and status of Black learners in NS. In 1994 BLAC released its *Report on Education* with 46 recommendations. One of the recommendations was that BLAC become a Council on African Canadian Education (CACE) which was granted in 1996. Another recommendation was the establishment of an Africentric Learning Institute [ALI] that will assist in curriculum development and conduct on-going research on issues impacting Black learners in Nova Scotia. This is where the initiative for this masters degree in education (in lifelong learning) arose.

The aims of the program are to address the under representation of African Nova Scotian educators in leadership roles, to increase the human resource pool of qualified educators capable of assuming leadership roles (such as in the soon to be established ALI) and in the education sector in general. Unique aspects of the program are that program planning is done in a partnership between MSVU and CACE (through an educational committee) and all 20 students are fully funded by scholarships paid for by the NS government.

As a village of learners, in the first course *Introduction to Lifelong Learning with an Africentric Focus,* we explored key concepts and theories and began developing our understandings of Africentricity and its role in lifelong learning. At the beginning of the course I provided some readings that served as a starting place for our first workshops but the students undertook a collective researching of the topic in the NovaNet library system, EBSCO data bases, popular culture and in other media. This became the base for expanding our examination and critique of the literature on Africentricity and developing our own theories of Africentricity in adult education. We have not solidified a static theory of Africentricity (this is not our objective) yet in our combined and personal theorizing of Africentricity we are developing ways to foster an analysis of life, of adult education/lifelong learning theories, practices, philosophies and histories through the

perspectives of peoples of African descent taking into consideration constructs of race, gender, class, ablebodiedness, heteronormativity, etc. For many of us this exploration provided a sense of relief, connection, solidarity, and renewed energy. As all of us had been schooled in a Eurocentric system and work in Eurocentric environments, we challenged ourselves and one another to tackle the epistemology and philosophies underpinning of our perspectives and those in the literature, in open dialogues and sharing circles. Course assignments provided opportunities to work collaboratively, contribute to the collective and to make personal connections through critical reflection. This classroom setting provided a sense of safety to speak about our experiences and perspectives. For me this was the first time I had ever shared some personal reflections of growing up/being schooled in a rural area in the Maritimes where bi-racial families were rare. One student expressed his feelings of safety and connection this way,

> [in] this class and this masters program... my colleagues' experiences in terms of dealing with racism is my experience. We do not have to convince each other that that these challenges exist …. I have looked back over my entire career as a student and have never had the opportunity and privilege of having a classroom where I was at the centre of the curriculum and can see the potential of Africentric education (personal communication with Martin Morrison, November 16, 2006).

> The learning process was not always smooth as we negotiated meaning,

problematized language (such as "the Black community"), challenged and created pluralistic views, integrated and differentiated a range of perspectives, recognized and grappled with contradictions, analyzed and interpreted our daily lives, and planned for/ took action to address harsh realities to create a more equitable world, yet we acknowledge the ways in which *our hopes and dreams enrich its every corner*. To return to the question, In what ways can an Africentric perspective contribute to adult education degree programs?, I suggest is it has great counter-hegemonic potential but for the educator and students it is not easy work and it cannot be a mere additive to, or a tiny decontextualized sliver of, the Eurocentric pie usually served up as a one course meal in adult education programs.

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