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Getting Ahead or Getting By: Historical Images of Adult Education

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Abstract: This study investigates how still images depict adult education and how those images are situated in prevalent discourses. The focus of this study is adult education in the 1930s at the Highlander Folk School and the Works Progress Administration.

Introduction

Images are an important primary source of data and are an underrepresented information source in education and the social sciences. There is a strong preference for word based research in adult education. However, there has been an increase in image based research since 1980 in the social sciences and K-12 education (Emmison & Smith, 2000; Margolis, 2000; Mietzner, Myers, & Peim, 2005). This topic builds on and advances image based research with cross disciplinary practices and blends knowledge from diverse fields. Images inform us about preferred teaching methods, power relations, class, gender, and culture. Word based accounts exist that act as evidence of the adult education experience. However, images can bring us closer to understanding the learner's experience and provide visual evidence of the dominant discourses in adult education. This paper will discuss some challenges and strategies for conducting image based historical research, as well as suggested methods for the analysis of images.

Adult Education in the 1930s

The Depression era in the United States is characterized by government agencies and legislation which affect this study in some way, by legalizing unions that forged the mission of Highlander Folk School, employing artists to advertise federally sponsored adult education, or commissioning photographs to document the New Deal. Beliefs about adult education between the wars range from considering education an essential part of social reform, considering education for personal or professional development, or considering liberal arts as the basis of adult education (Stubblefield & Keane, 1994). The government sponsored adult education programs and the Highlander Folk School offer two examples of 1930s adult education.

Adult education in the Depression entered an unprecedented era with the creation of the New Deal and the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Starting in 1933, the WPA provided jobs and free adult education classes throughout the country. Adult education had an uneven visibility at the state level prior to the New Deal. In 1932 just eighteen states provided some type of adult education, and less than 2,000 workers participated total in all union related residential schools or labor colleges. By 1936, a quarter of the U. S. population enrolled each year in some form of adult education (Kornbluh, 1987). By 1937, over 20,000 WPA general education programs were offered in the social sciences and humanities, and about 1,300,000 participants learned literacy in WPA program (Stubblefield & Keane, 1994).

Myles Horton, the "radical idealist" (A. Horton, 1989, p. 245) and founder of the Highlander Folk School, was passionate about social change and economic justice. He

dedicated Highlander and his life to serving the Appalachian people and communities. His mission was to educate the people, provide better economic opportunities, and preserve the culture. The Highlander Folk School offered resident programs in the 1930s and provided field work focused on unionizing southern workers to achieve better working conditions and improve the quality of life. Horton preferred a discussion based approach to learning based on the participants' needs. The importance of community forged a strong bond between participants and staff. Horton described the give and take of the Highlander community as being in a "circle of learners" (M. Horton, M. Kohl, & J. Kohl, 1998, p. 71).

WPA and Highlander Images

Images of the WPA and Highlander Folk School are housed in federal and state archives. The WPA photographs, part of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) photograph collection, and the WPA poster collection are archived primarily at the Library of Congress and at some state and city historical societies. The FSA photographs comprise a large collection of over 107,000 photographs taken from 1935-1943 (Finnegan, 2003). Funded by the government, the photographs were used to depict the human side of the economic and agricultural ravages of the Depression. About 200 photographs portray adult education. The photographs served a social function to put a face to poverty in the Depression and to show the management of the Depression through government programs such as the New Deal.

The posters of the Works Projects Administration were made by artists under a program funded through the New Deal (DeNoon, 1987). President Roosevelt started the WPA in 1933 and sponsored many arts projects and employed more than 5,000 artists. The artists created the posters that advertised education and community events, as well as social service messages, workplace safety, and public health. There are about fifty surviving posters related to adult education. Most photographs and posters are digitized and available on line at the Library of Congress (www.loc.gov).

The archives of the Highlander Folk School, located at the University of Wisconsin Madison, contain over 1,500 photographs and numerous written materials such as correspondence, brochures, newspaper clippings, and program materials. The written materials are carefully catalogued into subject categories, but the photographs are not sorted by date or subject. Unfortunately, the photograph archives are not documented in a way to correspond to the written material. Many photographs are not captioned, or the catalogued captions do not correspond to the caption on the photograph, and most photographs are not dated. No photographs from the 1930s are digitized or available for viewing via the internet.

Image Analysis

Conducting image based research requires multi-disciplinary engagements with art history, history, photography, cultural studies, or communication. Crossing academic boundaries brings a wide range of approaches and enriches image studies through the application of different methods from the social sciences and humanities. These disciplines take images seriously as research tools and offer a variety of investigative opportunities. There isn't a correct way or only way to mine data from images, but the literature provides some common approaches.

I use three paths of inquiry to analyze the images, based on methods outlined in comparable historical photographic studies of schooling (C. Burke 2001; Peim, 2005; Rousmaniere 2001), studies of the FSA photographs (Curtis, 1989; Finnegan, 2003), and methods research in image based studies (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, Rose, 2001, & 2003; Sturken & Cartwright, 2001; van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001). These paths of inquiry provide data for examination and compliment analysis via social semiotic theory and discourse analysis. The paths of inquiry are: image description, production of the image, and consumption of the image.

Image description. What is in the image? This path of inquiry consists of a detailed examination of the pictorial conventions of the image, the contents and composition of the photograph – people, rooms, buildings, and objects – any article or person. The use of margins, polarized compositions, “white” space, montage, spacing, and layout of objects demonstrate the attention to detail necessary for image description. Also important is recognition of what is not depicted or absent from images and collections.

Production of the image. Where was the image made? Who constructed the image? Was there a particular agency or organization that commissioned the image? Do we know who photographed the image or who is in the picture? Production can include information about the technology of the photograph or the genre of the image. Perhaps the image is part of a series, which helps place it in context of like images with similar locations, and subjects.

Consumption of the image. Consumption is concerned with how the image is disseminated as well as the audience or viewer. Where is the image located in the social world? Where was the image published? Where could a viewer find this image from its original production to the present day?

“Weapons of Critique”: Semiotics and Discourse Analysis

No reader of image based research can escape the influence of semiotics. A semiotic analysis will help uncover underlying themes and messages that may not be immediately apparent or that have previously gone unquestioned. Semiotics, or the study of signs, can also illuminate what society and culture deem to be important – or unimportant, as what is absent in the image is also relevant. In a way, semiotics is concerned both with the intentional and unintentional (van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001). The emerging field of social semiotics concerns itself with making meaning through various cues. The cues in an image can be color, line, perspective, composition, point of view, social distance, or the objects included in the image. Social semiotics looks at the way these cues form meanings or signifieds (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). Meaning emerges out of the visual cues, context, and individual interpretation.

Current semiotic studies demonstrate an interest in meaning making, representation, and understanding the signs we use to communicate, as well as the cultural implications of signs. The tradition of visual semiotics assumes that sign systems are integrally linked to culture and society. This tradition follows that semiotics plays a key role in the social construction of reality.

Discourse establishes the unwritten rules, collective ideals, and shared assumptions that encourage or limit societal participation and power to individuals, classes, or races. Discourse is comprised of knowledge and how it is activated or

evidenced in particular practices in text or images (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). Investigating discourse opens up explorations of power and ideologies. Visual discourse analysis is concerned with formation of discourse, perpetuations of discourse, how discourse is articulated, and how discourse acts as sites of resistance (Rose, 2001; Sturken and Cartwright, 2001; van Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2001).

The social semiotic and discourse analysis approaches serve as “weapons of critique” (Durham & Kellner, 2001, p. 4) to understand how power and ideologies are grounded in social systems and reflected in culture.

Application

I will briefly demonstrate some possible techniques with three images from the collections. Using social semiotics to tease out the details of a photograph of a WPA typing class (Figure 1) reveals the strong use of perspective. The viewer is positioned well above the students in the front of the room. This places the viewer at a distance that suggests detachment and observation. Most of the students are female. The angle of the shot is carefully arranged to include some view of each student. The rows of desks form a strong linear perspective. This gives the picture a directed point of view and moves the eye down the rows. The point of view reinforces the structure of the class, rigid pose of the students and drill of learning typing. The conformity and sameness is emphasized through the positioning of the viewer.

In contrast, a photograph of a Highlander Folk School Hosiery Workers’ Session (not pictured) is taken outside, with participants seated on the grass or chairs. The facilitator stands at a chalkboard mounted on an easel. Consistent with many Highlander photographs, minimal education resources are present, and the class is held outdoors. The viewer is situated at a comfortable distance from the group, in order to include all present, but not at an angle. Perspective is de-emphasized. The photograph expresses Horton’s circle of learners and connection to the Appalachian land.



Figure 1. Typing class, OH.

Library of Congress LC-USF34-060372-D.



Figure 2. Adult class, AL.

Library of Congress LC-USF33-

030355-M4.

Another FSA photograph illustrates the situation in the south (Figure 2). Although the south was hit hard by the Depression, few of the adult education FSA photographs originate in the south. The caption reads: “Juanita Coleman helps during recreation time for adult class.” A group of African American women are represented outside, against the backdrop of the rough hewn church that serves as a classroom. There is a sense of casualness, with arms uplifted and the women moving around. Compared to the typing class, these participants have no educational materials or modern classroom. Unlike the

typing class or Highlander photograph, it's difficult to tell who the instructor is. The church provides the frame for the composition. The typing class uses perspective to underscore the factory-like quality of the class; Figure 2 has a spontaneous quality that emphasizes movement and the relationship between the physical structure and the people. The Gees Bend photographs of adult education are the only FSA images I located that were photographed outside.

Discussion

Although these images are sketched out very briefly, I found some themes repeated in hundreds of images researched. These themes speak to gender in adult education, race, class, and power, and support the dominant and preferred discourse in adult education. Very few of the images depict minorities engaged in education. The WPA posters advertising free classes or opportunities for advancement through education depict only white people. Photographs of adult education taking place in the northern states show significantly richer resources such as well equipped classrooms with electricity and teaching materials.

Traditional gendered jobs are evidenced in the WPA collections, which reflect the limited employment opportunities for women at the time. Women are depicted engaged in classes related to sewing, clerical work, or cooking. Men are most likely depicted in factories or manufacturing. Examining more photographs of typing classes reveals that there is a white male placed near of the center of most pictures. Power is reflected in a number of ways. The power of the teacher is evident in the typing class; less so in the Gees Bend photograph. The teacher is usually made visually evident in most FSA photographs. The pedagogy is traditional classroom style with students seated and teacher standing. The Highlander photographs infrequently make the facilitator or teacher visually evident. Power is also reflected in the financial funding of the government to commission the WPA posters and FSA photographs.

These images continue to privilege a discourse regarding the purpose of adult education for personal advancement, to get ahead, not for social change. The availability of the FSA photographs, especially the free digitized versions on line, speaks to the power of the production and consumption of the images. It is much more difficult, time consuming, and expensive to uncover images of adult education and social change. The Highlander photographs are considerably more expensive to reproduce than the WPA images. The effect of the images is to normalize adult education purposes as standard and accepted. Foucault (1995) writes about the power of normalizing certain practices that become established and unquestioned. These images play a role in the discourse of adult education.

Discourse analysis and semiotics can be used together to form a visual archeology, which further assists with understanding images. Foucault, in his *Archeology of Knowledge* (1972), explains how a visual archaeology uses pictorial elements such as color, space, light, etc. as a knowledge “embodied perhaps in theories and speculations, in forms of teaching and codes of practice, but also in processes, techniques, and even in the very gesture of the painter” (p. 193-4). Foucault’s archeology, when applied to the visual arts, is concerned with discursive practices (Shapiro, 2003). I suggest that images help construct an archeology, “a domain of knowledge” (Foucault, 1972, p. 195). The

semiotic analysis helps us to discover the techniques in images that unlock the archeological disciplines that establish and sustain truths and dominant discourse.

However, every research approach has limitations and strengths. Image based research can be time consuming, expensive, and unwieldy when researching across multiple archives. It takes practice to become familiar with analysis and descriptive techniques. Researchers need to pay attention to reflexivity in image studies, as well as context (Rose, 2001). The credibility of an image based study is maintained by realizing which intertextual relationships are most compelling, and not overdoing weak connections. From a theoretical standpoint, semiotics is conceptually elaborate with dense terminology. Semiotics is often regarded as overly structured, but the new generation of social semiotics provides a more open approach. Semiotics and discourse analysis have clear strengths as analytical tools as they are concerned with power and knowledge, allow for marginalized voices, and advocate a hard look at how power works in society. While images are taken seriously in the literature of education history, particularly K-12 history, there is considerable room for exploration in adult education history. Lastly, it is important to emphasize that the analytic tools used in image studies are suggestions for interpretation. Social semiotics recognizes the necessity of allowing for multiple and divergent viewpoints (van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001). Viewers make meaning in the context of their own social and cultural experiences.

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