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Associative Ethical Dilemmas for Multicultural Sensitivity Assessment Derived from Adult Educational Theory

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Abstract: Adult educators promote non-formal assessment as demonstrated in their writings. Can tools then be developed that will gauge multicultural sensitivity? This paper examines that question, and personal, social, and legal implications of using multicultural sensitivity assessments for screening prospective employees, volunteers, and consultants for socially conscious groups, movements, and institutions.

Historical Development

As adult educators, the researchers for this paper have assessed the applicability of radical adult educational values useful for egalitarian sites, both formal and informal. We agree that most radical adult educational writers' words act as signposts for assumed adult educational values and behaviors (Brown, 1991). For the purposes of this paper, the adult educational views are largely derived from Henry A. Giroux, Stephen D. Brookfield, Robert Kegan, Phyllis Cunningham, Jack Mezirow, bell hooks, Paulo Freire, and Myles Horton. (These works fall within a common genre and have a common readership [amazon.com, 1999]). In a sense, these writings are not only an assessment of good adult educational values and behaviors, but they may act as an assessment of egalitarian adult education. Can a distillation of these adult educational values be made, and can they serve as a useful standard for assessing people working with disparate groups in society? If so, adult educational writings that act as leftist social critiques may demonstrate a model for ethical interchange in multicultural settings.

The goal of increasing multicultural environments, after the civil rights movements in the 1960s, encouraged programs aimed at minority access in most public, predominately white universities (Ford & Lang, 1992). Adult educators like Myles Horton were instrumental in establishing such programs. Similarly, the survey discussed in this paper (Timm, Armstrong, & Gutierrez, 1998) builds on those radical adult educational values and behavior supportive of minority access to higher education (Timm, Armstrong, & Gutierrez, 1995). In addition, in 1994 when the authors of this paper became the Committee for Mentoring Research, they began developing numerous tools for understanding the basis of assessing insensitivity to multiculturalism (Timm & Armstrong, 1995).

From 1994 to the present, the Committee for Mentoring Research recognized that an assessment tool usable by socially conscious adults or organizations could possibly fulfill a void in research.

Although assessments of insensitivity to multiculturalism have been established, it was unclear if a mechanism for assessing the general public in any culturally sensitive organization or institution could be developed. Even though creating this type of measurement device is a possibility, would it be ethical to utilize it for screening purposes?

Literary Perspectives

According to Rachal (1989), adult education must be proactive; its "greatest social responsibility may well be a fostering of social tolerance and interdependence" (p. 6). It would follow then that when adult educators analyze issues of multicultural sensitivity assessment, they should take a multidisciplinary approach. Rachal further believes that "adult education . . . has a direct and symbiotic relationship with the environment in which it occurs" (p. 3). More specifically, Giroux and McLaren (1991) explain that adult education has a responsibility to make society better and, progressive education needs to fight against discrimination shown through unfair privileges and deprivation found in American society.

One solution to cultural exclusion is to increase partnerships between culturally diverse and mainstream people, thereby encouraging often excluded individuals to more freely participate in adult education in both formal and informal settings (hooks, 1994). However, neither the mainstream nor the culturally diverse may be willing to hear the contributions of the other. This is to say that members in either group could benefit from a cultural sensitivity assessment tool to improve interaction in our diverse society. To achieve these ends, these distilled principles can enhance the climate in diverse adult educational communities, organizations, and movements. If these distillations are used in a multicultural assessment, it is possible that this measurement could help to select activists based on their understanding of and appreciation for cultural diversity. However, educators must be responsible for investigating and critically understanding the deeper ethical implications for any assessment before its implementation.

Out in the field, leftist social critics both consciously and unconsciously chose participants based on an assumed personal rubric of social consciousness; although some variation in this process exists, close reading of radical adult education literature supports these values. Possibly for that reason, Horton and Freire's (1991) work was easily infused into the common vernacular of adult educational activists. It is as though an unwritten but understood assessment was already developed by such adult educators, one that contains the tenets of social activism for the individual, work/education, and society as a whole: proactive adult educators can intuit when a kindred spirit has similar tenets for social action. Understanding this united feeling is important in community-based adult education and popular education. As Hamilton and Cunningham explain, "Individuals are drawn together because of common concerns" (1989, p. 440). And, "only participants themselves can decide what is and what is not of common concern to them" (Moshenberg, 1997, p. 88). Logically, adults would want to verify a person's commitment to "strengthening popular hegemony as a counterforce to the imposed silent oppression by the dominant culture" before sharing personal insights into their own social realities (Hamilton & Cunningham, p. 443). When major social risks are involved, knowing how a person stands on multicultural issues and oppression is imperative. After all, "without a shared vision of democratic community we risk endorsing struggles in which the politics of difference collapses into new forms of separatism" (Giroux & McLaren, 1991, p. 182).

It has been shown that leftist social critics naturally use an informal method for assessing multicultural sensitivity, which these researchers have made into a formal assessment instrument. This instrument, based on adult educational tenets, is necessary in traditional environments where cultural diversity is desired but where the existing staff may be resistant. The instrument is a diagnostic assessment that measures an individual's level of multicultural sensitivity (Vogel & Reder, 1998). Adults struggling to become more culturally sensitive generally have little insight into their own stereotypical views as many are unconsciously held. The goal is to eliminate "the subtle and not-so-subtle roadblocks to participation and creativity that exist" (Thomas, 1994, p. 61) when non-sensitive, culturally diverse adults interact.

However, some ethical considerations could be mentioned. First, no attitude can be measured without difficulty (Thurstone, 1928/1967; Likert, 1932/1970; Guttman, 1944/1967; Upmeyer & Six, 1989). No matter what method of assessment is being used, the exact location on a scale cannot be found because attitudes "are not static and fixed but rather are often growing and being adjusted" (Kahle, 1984, p. 41). In addition, as Allport (1935/1967) found, people possess many contradictory attitudes" (p. 12). Moreover, attitudes often change. Therefore, a previous study may not present a current depiction of the attitudes of any given group. In spite of these issues, many experts (Guttman; Henderson, Morris, & Fitz-Gibbon, 1987; Likert; Thurstone) believe that limiting attitude measurement to a scale is a reliable method. Still at this time, no universal ethical standard exists for using a multicultural assessment tool, which compels all radical adult educators to make decisions based on their particular sites and the utilization of all available knowledge.

Summary

Multiculturalism is a social movement that radical adult educators have historically embraced. They know that a safer environment will result if people are more tolerant of diversity and if sites are more diverse. To achieve these ends, the researchers of this paper have incorporated eight major adult educational principles into their assessment instrument: transformation (Mezirow, 1991), participatory democracy (Freire, 1991), shared space (Giroux, 1997), critical reflection (Brookfield, 1995), transgression for personal freedom (hooks, 1994), social change (Horton, 1991), equity (Cunningham, 1989), and evolving self (Kegan, 1983). The researchers' instrument is currently in process and has shown initially that multicultural sensitivity can be assessed within the realms of U.S. society as a whole as well as in an individual's personal and social lives and in their employment.

Although adult educators tend to rally around the basic concepts of multiculturalism and strategies to eliminate oppressive practices, whether a sensitivity assessment would be a useful or forbidden tool in a particular context must be determined by each individual educator. Issues such as the following must be addressed: Can participants be accepted or rejected into membership either at a personal, social, or work level depending on the results?

This area of research is important because multicultural assessment, especially when based on the tenets of historically sensitive notions of adult educators, could be an invaluable tool for adult educators seeking a supplementary evaluative method for prospective participants in

multicultural organizations and movements. This type of assessment could also aid adults in the quest to become more tolerant of diversity.

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