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Past Meets Present: Margaret Mead as a Case Study Discussion of Public Pedagogy and Public Scholarship

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Introduction

This roundtable aims to present and to create audience discussion of preliminary data categories from an ongoing historical project with implications for contemporary adult education practice. In this case, the researchers analyzed the work of Dr. Margaret Mead, a cultural anthropologist. Dr. Mead was outspoken about the need for all adults to become lifelong learners and of the corresponding responsibility of academics to freely discuss their work and thoughts in public forums in order to stimulate well-informed interest in community, family, and political issues. In fact, in addition to scholarly works, she wrote public essays, editorials, appeared in documentaries, and delivered speeches asking questions about, “Who is an adult? How do adults learn? How can we create opportunities for everyone who wishes to participate in shaping our communities?”

Her public addresses frequently raised questions about the issues of difference and inclusion, of civic participation and activism, attitudes towards democracy and public authority, and the pressures of conforming to societal ideas of ‘what is normal’, ethical applications of scientific advancement, of relationships and family, and of living in a time of international political tensions. (Mead Collection, Boxes I-109, I-209). We chose to focus on upon one segment of her public scholarship: monthly editorial columns published in the 1960s-1970s issues of Redbook magazine.

Background

Method.

We analyzed what Dr. Mead wrote about (content) as well as what appear to be her pedagogical strategies of public or civic engagement or informal adult learning. We analyzed 81 Redbook monthly editorial columns from January 1961 to June 1973, each column was approximately two pages long. In addition, we conducted three weeks of full-time historical archival analysis with the Library of Congress collection in Washington, D.C. These archives included Dr. Mead’s original personal notes, supporting research on topics, correspondence, drafts of columns, accompanying speeches, editorial discussion notes, and reader responses (letters) and Dr. Mead’s replies to reader responses. We utilized strategies on discursive analysis (Richardson, 2007), document and discourse analysis (Rapley, 2008), and work by Triage (2003) on magazine content analysis. Further analysis of the archival data is based a lens of public pedagogy and creating sites of resistance (Giroux, 2000; Wright & Sandlin, 2009) as well as higher education civic engagement literature (Bracken, 2008).

Supporting Literature.

Grummell (2010) reported findings on a study examining informal adult learning and television and how mass media relates to civic engagement. He posits that these types of activities have a relational aspect and allow family members or friends a way to non-defensively discuss current events, especially issues of difference and inclusion. Thus, there’s the chance for impromptu “What would you do?” conversations and reflection. His findings indicate that while there might be some movement of individual adults in acceptance of others (issues of difference)

or broadening perspectives, there is also the potential for passiveness or an ‘anaesthetic’ effect due to the mass media focus on entertainment or diversion. Similarly, Mead hoped to engage families, couples and friends in casual everyday conversation about contemporary societal issues – and she utilized an entertainment-based media outlet for her public scholarship.

Discussion

Dr. Mead’s columns included a subtle call to action, though she rarely suggested to readers that they go out and do something. She often suggested that readers reflect upon something, instead. Her personal notes indicate a commitment to challenging readers to think beyond themselves, but not to push so hard as to alienate the average adult. We have identified several ‘strategies’ that we believe were intentional elements of her public pedagogy. Dr. Mead juxtaposed or bridged individual and structural analysis of issues via everyday example and selected layering of expert information. As such, she tried to reinforce that we had an obligation to reflect upon how our individual experiences and growth connect to our larger environments and how we could change the things that we did not like or agree with, or reframe issues entirely. Dr. Mead used clear, accessible language yet she didn’t shy away from complex topics. Her personal notes stated that she trusted adults to be able to grapple with the hard stuff, regardless of formal educational levels. She frequently used irony or questions to draw attention to social and cultural norms and asked readers to ask themselves what their personal norms were, where they came from, and how they stood in contrast to others.

Her topics varied widely and are divided into the following categories: marriage & relationships; childrearing; world affairs; cultural anthropology; war & peace; what does it mean to be adult? Female? Male? American? Other?; Educational issues; democracy; how to build and sustain community; sex or sexuality; social responsibility; and legal reforms. Due to space constraints, the authors will provide additional analysis, archival examples and data at the conference session.

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