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Older Adult Education: A New Site for Colonization?

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Abstract: This paper argues that conventional older adult education has been captured largely by the white middle class and that social justice imperatives are missing. This form of education has been colonized by a significant minority to the detriment of a liberating agenda for many older adults.

Introduction

This paper takes a critical view of the development of older adult education, a sub-field within adult education that has blended perspectives from adult learning (and applied them to older learners) and educational gerontology. It examines significant developments manifested within educational gerontology and questions whether theoretical orthodoxy needs to be challenged. In particular, the author questions whether older adult education is a new site of colonization wherein older adults themselves have subjected themselves to dominant discourses, including those of humanism, individualism and neo-liberalism in both liberal education and workplace learning.

Older Adult Education in Westernized Countries

As is the case for adult education in general, older adult education as both a theoretical construct and as a field of practice can be viewed from multiple philosophical standpoints (Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982; Elsey, 1986; Findsen, 2005). In contemporary Western societies, the humanistic framework espoused by Peter Laslett (1989) has been adopted by many agencies of older adult education (e.g. the University of the Third Age, U3A), given that many of its operational tenets recall the optimism and romanticism of Knowles (1984) emphasising a democratic context for peer learning. Learning in later life, according to this middle-class ethos, is enlivened by the prospects of enhanced creativity, co-operative endeavour and individual expressiveness in this third age. However, counter-balancing the “need” to express oneself in the third age is the harsh reality for an increasing number of older people in an economic recession of making ends meet financially. Significant numbers of older people live in poverty and instrumental learning approaches tend to be gaining more prominence, especially as greater numbers of adults beyond 50 (an arbitrary age) remain in the workforce or seek fresh career challenges later in life (Phillipson, 1998).

In an early analysis of treatment of older people by society, Moody (1976), one of the pioneers of educational gerontology, discussed how modal patterns differ and range from negative reactions to more emancipatory trends (albeit, usually individually-focussed). His four modal patterns were:

1. *rejection* - where ‘the aged’ tend to be segregated and/or neglected and the underlying basic attitude is one of repression or avoidance;
2. *social service* - where professionals engage with older people on their behalf as in professional care and where the underlying motive is one of social welfare or liberalism;
3. *participation* - where older adults are in employment/volunteering or undertake second careers and where the basic attitude is one of social integration or “normalization”;

4. *self-actualization* - where individuals are encouraged to enact psychological growth, self-transcendence where the fundamental attitude is one of acknowledging wisdom or ego-integrity.

These patterns, when applied to educational settings, translate into situations where older people are disparaged, neglected or stereotyped as incapable of autonomy at one extreme to those where they are perceived as uniquely placed to undergo transcendence and enormous self-growth on the other. While well-intentioned, the over-riding stance of many in the professions (e.g. medicine) towards older people is paternalistic where senior citizens are viewed as victims of their enfeeblement in need of constant vigilance. Education in such instances is fundamentally cemented in a functionalist paradigm being concerned primarily with coping skills and older people's adjustment to the norms of society (Glendenning, 2000). In truth, the vast majority of older people are fit and healthy and seek to participate effectively as informed citizens even if rapid technological and social change has left some of them rather bewildered.

With regard to the functions of agencies providing adult education for seniors, Findsen (2005) has categorized organizations as follows:

- a) those self-help agencies controlled by older adults themselves to meet their own learning needs (e.g. University of the Third Age);
- b) those agencies that organize programmes explicitly for seniors (e.g. the Pre-Retirement Association);
- c) those agencies that develop programmes which older people often frequent though not intentionally designed for them (e.g. University continuing education programs);
- d) those agencies for whom older people are invisible; hence, no effort is made to provide suitable facilities or programs.

In effect, these categories of agencies mirror the dominant modes of treatment espoused by Moody (1976). Some programmes entail maximum participation of seniors in the design and implementation of learning while others ignore their presence. However, even within this range of provision, there is little evidence of programs that challenge orthodoxy or entail a social purpose agenda that might be outside the dominant ideologies of Western societies.

A Critical Assessment of Older Adult Education

This paper argues for a critique of "mainstream" older adult education where middle-class, primarily male, views of the field have gained hegemonic status. From one point of view, the self-directed ethos of some significant agencies such as U3A appears laudatory. U3A embodies characteristics of adult learning principles that humanists have long held as fundamental to an autonomous, potentially liberatory, agency. U3A embrace a peer learning framework where the distinction between "teacher" and "learner" is minimalized; the human resources of local groups are used effectively as "experts" emerge from within the organization; curriculum is elastic and mainly confined to more expressive subjects as in the arts and social sciences; hierarchy and administration are kept to a minimum; costs are maintained at a very low level; assessment and exams do not feature, unlike in a credentialized bureaucracy (Swindell, 1999).

Most older adult education exemplars follow a similar pattern to the U3A of sustaining educational opportunity for those who have already benefitted disproportionately from earlier educational provision. The Institutes for Learning in Retirement (ILRs) in North America and the popular Elderhostel movement are bodies which, perhaps unwittingly, reinforce existing social inequalities. Many of these Western style, supposedly innovative, agencies of older adult

education illustrate that “active ageing” or “successful ageing” is fairly readily accomplished in part by joining these cultural enclaves of middle-class privilege. As many of these agencies do not require support from the state (perhaps occasionally gaining financial help from universities), they demonstrate an adherence to a lifelong learning rhetoric which supports self-development and individualism. The field has been colonized by this acceptance of white middle class norms at the very time most societies are becoming increasingly diverse. Where are the voices of the ‘other’ or the marginalized?

To answer this question of the empowerment of the less articulate and silent amid older adults, we seek guidance from proponents of critical educational gerontology (CEG). The field of educational gerontology became “critical” via the influence of critical theories applied to this sector. In particular, there is a genealogy of influence involving authors from social gerontology (e.g. Phillipson, 1998) who have been concerned about increasing powerlessness of seniors and rampant age discrimination joined by critics from within the older adult sector such as Glendenning (2000) and more latterly, Cusack (2000), Formosa (2005), Findsen (2005) and Withnall (2010). Further, agencies such as NIACE in the UK have focussed more attention on the plight of older learners via campaigns such as Older and Bolder (Carlton & Soulsby, 1999) but also through a host of publications including Withnall, McGivney and Soulsby (2004) and McNair (2009). Undoubtedly, the profile of older adult education has been lifted in recent times. However, amid this emergent identity there is a consciousness that functionalist interpretations of older adulthood, those advocating “successful aging” and/or “active aging”, tend to reproduce existing power relations and support the status quo. Critical educational gerontologists argue for a more socially just outcome for the historically “oppressed” (Freire, 1984). More specifically, Glendenning and Battersby (1990) espoused four principles/purposes for CEG:

- (i) to explain the link between capitalism, aging, and education in later life with a view to reduce structured dependency of older people on the state
- (ii) to challenge the view that education is a neutral enterprise
- (iii) to embrace a more liberatory discourse to include concepts, largely derived from Freire, such as conscientization, domestication and dialogue
- (iv) to focus on praxis (the theory-action dialectic) where dialogue can lead in pedagogical contexts to effective educational strategies.

CEG, in short, supports an emancipatory approach to teaching-learning where education is a collective endeavour among people of common purpose who want to effect significant social change. This (usually radical) social change involves communal action against oppressive structures which support what currently exists.

Within the realm of CEG, explanations vary according to theoretical positions but the political economy approach has considerable richness for critique and potential social action. Here the focus is on the structured inequalities in societies reflective of dominant-subordinate groups’ positioning in terms of gender relations, social class, race/ethnicity and age. Rarely does an area of social stratification exist in isolation from another; more typically, age and other categories of marginalisation intersect to present multiple sites of potential disadvantage. In addition, the role of the state is seriously examined with regard to the distribution of resources and related mode of social control, inclusive of education (Estes, 1991).

In the context of older adult provision epitomised by U3As and ILRs, I argue that the dominant discourse of self-help, emphasizing autonomy, is actually often exclusory. There is certainly capture of the (usually white) middle-class and a cultural blindness to diversity

(see Formosa, 2000, for a more elaborate critique). Where within U3A do we see working-class older people, those from minorities in respective countries or any curriculum which challenges the status quo? Where is the acknowledgement of difference or experiences of the “other”? In-built into the operations of this kind of provision is a form of social capital (Field, 2002) such that those who have already benefitted from formal education can now capitalize on non-formal learning in terms of expanded social networks, access to expertise and local knowledge.

In the realm of paid work, there is colonization of a different type. The dominant paradigm in a neo-liberal regime, one that is consistent with elements of a lifelong learning agenda, is that of upskilling the workforce, making the workplace as efficient as possible and getting rid of “deadwood” (Olssen, Codd & O’Neill, 2004). Older adults constitute a marginalized subset of the workforce, increasingly working in part-time or casual positions to complement the central core of workers who are predominantly young and better credentialed. This entails a heavy instrumental philosophy which is consistent with the hallmarks of neo-liberalism - heightened efficiency, flatter management structures, de-regulated environments, and encouragement of personal advancement. We need to acknowledge, however, that there are differential work and income opportunities available to different categories of workers - social stratification in the forms of social class, gender, race/ethnicity, geographical location intersects with ageism to compound employment difficulties in later life (Findsen, 2005). The global workplace is a tough site for many older workers unless they can present special capabilities to employers which younger people cannot (e.g. historical knowledge of an industry).

In the context of lifelong learning for a learning society, nation states have focussed on the economic agenda of making individuals as flexible, innovative and entrepreneurial as possible in a postmodern world. While other agendas feature in a lifelong learning discourse (personal fulfilment, development of an informed citizenry, and social cohesion) (Wain, 2004), there is no mistaking the pre-eminence of the economic imperative for nations to compete in the global marketplace. Lifelong learning is captured within this framework, joining hands with neo-liberalism to assert that really worthwhile learning is that which leads to the efficient, productive worker. In this discourse, older workers find it difficult to compete, given that only some want to work full-time and they struggle against the advent of new technologies in the workplace and the need for fresh credentials (Beatty & Visser, 2005).

The distinction between “worker” and “non-worker” is no longer as straightforward as in the past. Some older adults take whatever casual work they can get to supplement a family’s income. However, in terms of access, they can face discrimination in the workplace and are less likely than their younger counterparts to receive further training and professional development (Bytheway, 1995). What happens in a workplace is influenced by multiple stakeholders: the employer, the worker, and the state, as regulator of public policy and legal aspects. Given that older adults are often seen as part of a peripheral labour source, their relative power in the workplace is usually low. Of course, their status and position from earlier in life significantly affects outcomes for older workers. Professional people (more often men than women) can retain useful networks for well paid work and they are more likely to benefit from private pensions, thus securing financially their third age for leisure and learning. On the other hand, working-class people are much less likely to secure an encore career or consolidate their futures with consistent work (Lamdin & Fugate, 1997).

Concluding comment

In this paper I have argued that the dominance of conventional older adult education modelled from a predominantly humanistic and/or liberal education perspective has produced a normatively stylized learning format which suits those who already have considerable social capital. Significant groups of older people, particularly those from minorities, do not fit into this cultural regime. In the realm of work-related learning, many older people are outside the norm of the youthful, well-qualified worker and struggle for acceptability.

What is missing in both scenarios - middle class dominated agencies of older adult education; the workplace as a precarious site of learning for older people - is any kind of transformative education which challenges dominant discourses and provides opportunities for older people outside the mainstream to combine their efforts to assert their rights to knowledge and collective empowerment. A re-invigoration and application of Freirean philosophies and/or those espoused by Myles Horton of the Highlander Center for Research and Education would go a long way to re-addressing the loss of a social justice agenda in older adult education. It is too easy for well-heeled older people to focus on leisure-based activities which sustain their own social capital and reproduce their convivial social practices. In so doing, they colonize the world of possibility for a large minority of elders for whom education is not normally a high priority and for whom collective action to improve their position is not part of their consciousness.

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