Critical Transformational Learning in the Post-Postmodern World

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Recommended Citation

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Abstract: We examine the modernist underpinnings of traditional adult learning and development theories and evaluate elements of those theories through more contemporary lenses. Drawing upon recent "public pedagogy" literature, we argue that much learning takes place outside of formal educational institutions. We look beyond modernist narratives to consider the possible implications for critical adult learning occurring in and through contemporary fragmented, digital, media-saturated culture.

The field of adult education has long relied on theories of adult learning and development that are grounded in master narratives of modernity. Rosenau (1992) links modernist narratives to humanism, which places the human subject at the center, emphasizing "the individual as a potentially effective, rational agent. Humanists are said to be naively optimistic about the nature of humankind, the potential for improvement in the human condition, and the scope of human accomplishments" (pp. 47-48). Individuals are conceptualized as rational, reason is viewed as the way to make sense of experience, and individuals are believed to have both the freedom and power to act. Modernist narratives undergird prominent theories that have influenced adult education, including humanistic psychology and theories of lifespan and cognitive development.

We question these master narratives of modernity and their stronghold within adult education through a discussion of how adult learning and development occur within the contexts of and are shaped by the forces of various sites of public pedagogy, a focus we posit is missing from many dominant discourses of adult learning and development within adult education. Public pedagogy refers to various forms, processes, and sites of education and learning that occur beyond the realm of formal educational institutions—including popular culture, informal educational institutions, dominant discourses, and public intellectualism and social activism. While public pedagogy is conceptualized in the wider educational literature in these various ways, in this paper we focus on *popular culture* and *informal institutions*, as these are the public pedagogies most often taken up by adult educators. We focus on how master narratives of adult identity—who we are with regard to race, class, gender, sexuality, etc.—are portrayed to us and perpetuated through various public pedagogies. That is, as conceptualized by much of the public pedagogy literature, adults are not the fully autonomous, agentic beings of traditional adult development and learning literature, but are shaped or constructed by the media and popular cultures within which adults live and by the cultural institutions with which they interact. Adults are also, however, not wholly passive creations of the culture industries. We also, then, focus on how adults learn to resist the dominant ideologies perpetuated through some public pedagogies.

The main focus in much of the work we discuss is on how various sites of public pedagogy foster or hinder "transformational learning." While this concept is defined differently by various scholars, in general it refers to learners developing more open and inclusive worldviews and recognizing how "uncritically accepted and unjust dominant ideologies are embedded in everyday situations" (Brookfield, 2000, p. 36). However, while we argue that the focus on public pedagogy in the literature we present provides a new cultural dimension to discussions of adult learning and development, the authors we discuss provide differing conceptualizations of adult identity and of how critical transformational learning occurs, some of which reproduce the same modernist notions of adult development that their simultaneous focus on culture critiques. We discuss two main avenues of thought on critical learning in this literature. One draws upon more unitary notions of the self and posits that critical transformational learning is the result of rational dialogue facilitated by an educator-as-interlocutor. An alternative vision focuses more on embodied and aesthetic aspects of learning and sees transformation, learning, and development as more tentative and ambiguous. In this latter view, the self is viewed as multidimensional and always in the process of "becoming."

Identity, Hegemony, Resistance, and Public Pedagogy

Missing from these dominant discourses of adult learning and development is a focus on the interactions between adults and the wider cultures within which they live and interact. We argue that some of what we learn through public pedagogies such as popular culture and informal cultural institutions are the master narratives of adult identity. That is, we learn who we are (or should be) with regard to race, class, gender, sexuality, etc. and whose cultures and histories are considered "normal" through the ways these cultures and identities are portrayed and perpetuated through public pedagogies. This proposition is widely accepted in many academic fields and is increasingly being taken up within adult education. Tisdell (2008) argues that adult educators should pay more attention to popular culture because adults learn from the practice of cultural consumption (and production) in their lives, while Taylor (2010) calls for adult educators to focus on how informal cultural institutions such as museums help shape dominant forms of knowledge, as well as how they can be sites of contestation.

Much of the work within adult education focusing on popular culture and other sites of public pedagogy explicates how they reproduce hegemony, through constructing "socially acceptable" identities. This is especially true of the work emerging on this topic throughout the 1980s and 1990s within adult education, although this focus remains in current research. Graham's (1989) work on romance novels and television exemplifies this approach, as he provides an analysis of how "our representative media achieve a form of ideological control over the social construction of reality" (p. 153). With regard to cultural institutions, Borg and Mayo (2010) explicate how Malta's National Maritime Museum operates hegemonically as it conceals or sanitizes the voices, identities, and histories of working class people. Heimlich and Horr's (2010) recent research reveals that visitors' experiences with/in zoos, museums, and other cultural sites are tied to the development and expression of identity. Through ignoring the contested histories and stories of the subaltern, the Malta Maritime Museum presents only one "sanctioned" and "normalized" view of the region's history and cultural identity(ies), and thus limits the ways in which visitors can form identities outside of the "official" ones on offer.

Increasingly, however, adult educators addressing public pedagogies are focusing on spaces of *resistance* within those sites. For example, research has focused on spaces of resistance within popular culture, where adults learn to challenge dominant conceptions of racial, gendered,

and class identities. Armstrong (2000), for example, explores how "television viewing can have tremendous potential for stimulating critical commentary and raising awareness of a wide range of issues" (p. 17). In particular, Armstrong argues that soap operas such as *Coronation Street* address political and social issues such as health, welfare, employment, and education, and that learners engage in critical learning when watching them. One especially interesting and relevant space of resistance involves some mainstream television shows that trouble traditional conceptualizations of adult development and adult learning. Jarvis (2005) provides a provocative example, using the TV show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Jarvis examined how the characters in *Buffy* engage in self-directed learning and argues that their everyday learning is directly related to their growth and development. Through learning they change, develop, and become more complex. Jarvis argues, however, that this portrayal of adult learning and development challenges traditional perspectives and upholds more postmodern conceptualizations of learning and development. The portrayal of learning on the show, for example, challenges the notion of the "authentic" or "unitary" self that has been popular in both humanist adult learning and development theories as well as more radical traditions that rely on the notion of the critical self awakening from false to true consciousness through critical transformational learning. Finally, recent work exploring informal cultural institutions has focused on how such spaces of public pedagogy can foster critical learning and critical identity development. Grenier (2010), for example, explicates how some museums encourage visitors to play and explore, and argues that this kind of collaborative play provides individuals with new ways of thinking about their identities and about how these individual identities are related to the broader social world.

Fostering Critical Transformational Learning: Competing Perspectives

The main focus in much of this literature is on how various sites of public pedagogy foster or hinder transformational learning. As stated above, we believe the focus on culture in the public pedagogy literature provides a counternarrative to more traditional discussions of learning and development. However, we argue that adult educators focusing on public pedagogy conceptualize adult identity, and the ways in which critical transformational learning can be fostered, in a variety of ways, some of which reproduce modernist notions of adult development.

Much of the literature addressing the connections between critical adult learning and public pedagogy focuses on the importance of adult educators facilitating transformational learning experiences through critical dialogue deconstructing popular culture and through promoting stronger critical media literacy among learners. In this view, transformational learning occurs when "progressive educators" (Giroux, 2001, p. 588) enact "*interpretation as intervention*" (p. 588, our emphasis), which is typically conducted in critical pedagogical fashion, through rational discussion. Some critical adult education researchers wishing to foster critical pedagogy with learners focus on how adult educators can help learners deconstruct the hegemonic ideas about race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and other positionalities depicted in mass media and explore how these messages are integrated into individual identities. Graham (1989), for example, urges adult educators to help students "become progressively emancipated from the spell of media's construction of reality" (p. 160) and calls for adult educators to "stimulate intellect and imagination so that adults may be enabled to move towards understanding the workings of culture and power in their lives" (p. 160). And Tisdell and Thompson (2007) found that learners' understandings of race, class, and gender issues in popular culture were deepened with the help of facilitated classroom discussions. In order to push learners into critical analysis they suggest that instructors guide discussions with questions

focusing on how popular culture is produced and what dominant messages are in its content.

While these authors seemingly believe that adult learners need a critical pedagogue as interpreter and focus on the rational dimensions of the critical learning process; other research posits that adult learners who interact with popular culture can engage in critically transformative learning on their own, focus more on non-cognitive aspects of learning, and discuss notions of selfhood that are tentative rather than fixed or unitary. For example, there is emerging evidence that adults can, through their interactions with public pedagogies, engage in critical transformative learning without the help of an intervening adult educator and without critical, rational dialogue. Research has shown that adult learners construct their identities through identifying with particular fictional characters and that they are exposed to a variety of ideologies through engaging with popular culture, from which they choose particular elements to incorporate into their lives. Through interviews of British women who had watched the television show *The Avengers* in the 1960s, Wright (2007) found that the pleasures of watching prime-time TV drama can lead to adult identity development and critical transformational learning. Recent work focusing on informal cultural institutions also highlights adults engaging in transformational learning through interaction with/in these sites and explores how this learning often is enacted through non-cognitive ways of knowing. Kemp and Parrish (2010) explain, through a discussion of the performance ethnographies Kemp creates from rewriting historical archives, how analytic and rational thinking is privileged in academia, a situation that downplays "feelings or personal relations" (p. 55). In contrast to academia's focus on rational thinking, Kemp's non-verbal, improvisational, performative work encourages "adult learners to cultivate multiple ways of knowing" as they learn to foster connections between themselves and others. Likewise, Packer and Ballantyne (2010) discuss how zoos foster affective connections between humans and animals that help encourage among learners critical identities as environmentalists. Parrish (2010) also explains that cultural institutions such as zoos and museums "heighten emotions" among learners and that through these affective experiences these spaces of public pedagogy "can foster social change" (p. 87). Heimlich and Horr (2010) describe the kind of learning happening in many of these cultural institutions as "continual, nonlinear, and unique to the person" (p. 60); Parrish (2010) states that this learning happens in ways that de-center the educator, placing him or her "on the periphery of the learning process" (p. 88).

Discussion

These conflicting findings raise questions about the roles of the adult educator, popular culture, critical reflection, and positionality in facilitating critical learning experiences, and point to differing conceptualizations of learning, development, and identity. In the studies we reviewed that aim to increase the critical media literacy of adult learners, the engine for transformation is the acquisition of a set of at least somewhat predetermined critically pedagogical criteria. Much of the work focusing on deconstructing hegemonic meanings from popular culture and cultural institutions through critical dialogue facilitated by an adult educator as critical pedagogue also relies, we argue—like the modernist narratives we discussed above—on a unitary notion of the self and on a linear view of the adult development process. This vision of the stable, "authentic" self and of critical dialogue as the path to "discovering" that self is critiqued by Ellsworth (1988), who argues that these kinds of rational dialogues may reinforce repressive myths by attempting to dictate who people should be and what they should think, rather than allowing for the open "talking back"—the "defiant speech that is constructed within communities of resistance" (p. 310). We agree that we must be mindful of the tendency of critical pedagogy that

focuses on adult development and learning towards the goal of more inclusive worldviews to rely too heavily on "rationalistic tools" that "fail to loosen deep-seated, self-interested investments" (p. 313) based on typically European, White, male, middle-class ideals.

The alternative vision of critical transformational learning and development focuses more on embodied, holistic, performative, intersubjective, and aesthetic aspects of learning and development and sees transformation, learning, and development as more tentative and ambiguous. Ellsworth (2005) argues, for example, that the most powerful learning experiences arise out of public pedagogies that "aim their designs at involving their users in ways that exceed psychical mechanisms such as memory, recognition, or cognition" (p. 6). This sort of learning "challenges assumptions that our reasons for initiating particular political action must be grounded in language-based knowledge claims" (p. 29). For Ellsworth (2005) the self is multidimensional, and critical learning and development do not occur in rational or linear ways. She further explains that new ways of seeing the world "can be released only through movement into and within the messy intervals of space and time between the 'things' we already know and between the 'begins' we have already made of ourselves and others" (p. 123). Ellsworth states that the "in-between" is the site where personal, social, cultural transformations occur—this "in-between-ness" is also a metaphor for her vision of *adult identity* itself. The "in-between" is "the only place—the place around identities, between identities—where becoming, an openness to futurity, outstrips the conservational impetus to retain cohesion and unity" (p. 123).

In this perspective, critical learning is a *relational* practice that disrupts binaries, and consists of "experiences of being radically in relation to one's self, to others, and to the world" (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 2). Ellsworth offers many examples of sites of public pedagogy that foster these kinds of ambiguous, relational, transformative learning potentials, including the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. Through her analyses of these sites of public pedagogy, Ellsworth focuses on how they foster openness, creativity, and ambiguity, and how they operate as transitional spaces, as they seek to relate learners' inner selves with outer social realities. Adult educators embracing this perspective focus on how critical transformative learning, or opening up critical democratic imagination—through aesthetic and noncognitive ways of being and knowing—involves avoiding certainty and encouraging exploration, what Ellsworth (1988) calls a "pedagogy of the unknowable." In this pedagogy, narratives and ideas are always partial, "in the sense that the meaning of an individual's or group's experience is never [completely] self-evident or complete" (p. 318). Indeed, these authors posit that the work of critical education is most powerful when it demonstrates the pedagogical force of not dictating "the final correct answer" (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 76). Grenier (2010), for example, focuses on how play in museums can "support opportunities for creativity, social interaction, and adult learning" (p. 78), because play involves the affective realm and allows for openness and ambiguity rather than a rational quest for the right answer; this ambiguity "allows visitors to create their own meanings and /or make new discoveries" (p. 81) as they learn new ways of thinking about themselves and of relating to others in society. In these transitional spaces our knowing is incomplete and unfinished; in Ellsworth's words, these powerful pedagogies are forces "through which we come to have the surprising, incomplete knowings, ideas, and sensations that undo us and set us in motion toward an open future" (pp. 17-18). Thus Ellsworth's views of development and learning both engage with how learning and development are grounded in everyday life experiences and engagements with informal spaces of learning, and provide a vision of the learning self that is incomplete and constantly changing. We argue this vision provides a challenge to conceptions of the self posited in more traditional adult development and learning theories.

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Conclusion

Our discussion raises questions about the role of adult educators in fostering transformational learning, given the increasing recognition of the importance of the non-mediated learning occurring in various sites of public pedagogy. In the spirit of the work we discussed that is focused on learning in the making, ambiguity, and relationality, we refuse to provide a definitive answer to this query. We do agree with Ellsworth (2005), however, that a more tentative, ambiguous, complicated perspective on identity and learning calls for the staging of "pedagogy as the field of emergence of the learning self" (p. 28). If so enacted, as Ellsworth explains, educators would "create places of learning in embodied terms and in ways that depart from the dominant perceptions of learning as the acquisition of knowledge driven by cognitive functions" (p. 28). We hope we have raised questions concerning the nature of critical learning, the nature of adult identity, the roles of the adult educator, and the meanings of transformation and critical pedagogies. We contend that the public pedagogies we have discussed have the potential to foster critical learning through opening up spaces of incomplete knowings and ideas.

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