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Adult Education at Risk: Fronts of Resistance to Neoliberalism

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Abstract: This paper theorizes from the literature of neoliberalism and adult education. It considers how neoliberal policies have narrowed the scope of adult education while also evaluating how instructors and students can work to restore the broader scope that fostered participatory citizenship.

Introduction

Neoliberalism is a global system of political economy with interests in protecting and expanding the hegemony of private markets. The specific priorities involve deregulation of markets, privatization of many public goods and services, and reduced funding for social services that are not privatized. This fundamentalist form of capitalism has brought massive benefits to a small elite minority, and it has brought dwindling rewards and austerity to the masses. Exactly when the era of neoliberalism began is subject to debate, but a clear turning point was when a military coup in Chile in 1973 replaced the democratically elected and socialist President Salvador Allende with the repressive 17-year dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet, whose economic advisors were Milton Friedman's disciples from the University of Chicago. Exactly when a systematic resistance to neoliberalism began is also subject to debate, but the first local uprising to gain a sustained global following, thanks to the Internet, was the Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas, Mexico, which started on January 1, 1994, precisely as NAFTA went into effect.

This paper highlights some of the literature regarding the effects of neoliberalism on adult education, and also regarding fronts of resistance to neoliberalism from adult education settings – both formal and informal. The purpose of this exploration is to find patterns of educational struggles that connect local and regional issues with the global phenomenon of neoliberalism. Educators who are critical of neoliberalism often become scholar-activists who work on particular important issues, such as racism, sexism, or heterosexism, while paying only tangential attention to global political economy. Largely missing from the literature is a set of broad and deep studies with a critique of neoliberalism within an inclusive center. Government and corporate grants do not reward scholars with this agenda for the obvious reason that such scholarship is subversive to the neoliberal status quo. Academic freedom for scholars has limits as research universities require faculty to gain resources from outside sources. A discourse of dissent against neoliberalism still exists, though, from independent-minded and determined scholars, journalists, and activists. I am engaged in the struggle to bring such dissent out of the shadows and into the light of critical study that carefully evaluates the challenges and possibilities.

Institutionalizing Neoliberal Adult Education

Adult education has a rich history of direct involvement in social movements (Holst, 2002). The Highlander Folk School and the Freedom Schools remain as examples in the United

States of the power behind grassroots organizing and adult popular education. They have inspired numerous adult educators to engage in pedagogy of resistance against oppressive social conditions. The prospect of growth of a radically democratic education, though, could not continue uncontested. Reactionary forces knew a threat when they saw it, and they organized behind corporations and their lobbyists to curb the progressive and radical currents in adult education.

As neoliberalism emerged and prevailed, it became clear that its goal was not to eliminate governments' powers but rather to harness them into tools for the interests of unfettered markets. This creates the illusion that neoliberalism functions within and for democracy. It was in 1998 that President Clinton signed into law the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), which dramatically changed the relationship between the federal government and adult basic education (ABE) programs. This legislation consolidated federal funding to programs into a single stream that rewarded curricula based on workforce development. It also implemented the National Reporting System, which imposed performance standards aligned with a narrow set of outcomes.

Dianne Ramdeholl (2011) chronicles how an unwelcomed reach of state and federal governments had arrived in an adult literacy program in Brooklyn even before the WIA arrived. The Open Book, founded in 1985, was a program that had found inspiration in Highlander and in the problem-posing praxis of Freire (2000). Adults who had gained only low functioning levels of literacy in their youth in schools discovered a friendly and supportive environment at The Open Book. Instructional staff involved students in various decisions regarding the curriculum and the pace of instruction. As students advanced in the program, they assisted in tutoring newcomers. A high level of trust grew between instructors and students. Then, as early as 1989, state laws required ABE instructors to track attendance of welfare recipients. This turned instructors into agents of social control and threatened to dismantle the high levels of trust between instructors and students. The 1996 Welfare Reform Act, then, required welfare recipients either to work or to spend most of their time seeking a job. For many, this destroyed their ability to make time for literacy instruction. Literacy programs like The Open Book lost enrollment and, therefore, lost funding. The Open Book closed in 2001.

ABE instructors now find that their livelihoods are connected to their compliance with the WIA. They have neither resources nor time to implement a problem-posing model of teaching and learning. They, like their K-12 counterparts, have felt pressure to become technocrats who provide a linear instruction for passing a high-stakes test. Neoliberal education policies (dubiously labelled "reforms") contain the hidden curriculum of widening the opportunity gap between the haves and have-nots. While the WIA purports to prepare adults for the workforce, it does not provide a space for questioning how neoliberalism seeks to disempower workers globally.

Knowledge is Information

Merriam and Grace (2011) write, "Within neoliberal economies, knowledge is reduced to information, thus making it variously transferrable, replaceable, and disposable. In this milieu, the space and place of adult education appears even more tenuous" (p. 108). What information can adult learners in ABE programs receive in this WIA era? What passes the gatekeepers to enter into the official curriculum? As students become consumers of information for entering the

workforce, what are they missing that could foster their development as citizens who participate fully in democracy?

The phrase “lifelong learning” has taken on an innocuous meaning in conventional discourse. Uncritical views of lifelong learning place it in a vacuum without context of social relations and power. Martin Kopecký (2011) contributes an important analysis of Foucault and adult education, discussing the relationship between a subject, power, and freedom and the issue of normality: “It is through the subject and subjectification that power is practiced; a subject separated from other subjects constitutes a sort of bridge between freedom and power. In other words, freedom and power are not mutually exclusive but mutually dependent” (p. 251). Kopecký adds that the issue of normality enters because lifelong learning has taken on a common-sense view that it is neutral. He explains how neoliberalism emphasizes the economization of education and uses education to separate individuals in what is commonly viewed as competitive meritocracy with fair opportunities for all. Adult education in neoliberal reality is a setting where lifelong learning exists within power relations whereby “freedom is confronted with control, inequalities, and risks” (p. 259). Instructors of adult education risk their jobs if they depart from the prescriptive narrative that neoliberalism controls through policies, so they fearfully develop a self-control or self-censorship that steers away from teaching and learning of social justice. The notion that lifelong learning is politically neutral thus becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In this environment critical educators have to choose among fight, flight, and compliance. They can resist the neoliberal policies through subversive instruction and activism, they can quit their job to join the struggle from outside, or they can censor themselves while holding onto their work. The final of these three options is the safe way, especially in these times when the prospect of finding a new line of work can seem daunting. Those who have been adult educators for decades know what adult education was and what it is has become under neoliberal policies. Co-authors Garvey, Gordon, Kleinbard, and Wasserman (2013) have worked in different capacities in adult education over the last few decades. From the late 1970s to the early 90s, their work in adult literacy programs in New York City involved a broad vision for fostering participatory citizenship. Then came the policy shifts of the mid- to late 90s that reduced their work to being technocrats for human capital development. Now the New York State Education Department issues annual report cards to adult education programs, which feel pressure to manipulate data that inform scores. The co-authors conclude with a call to action:

We believe that adult education would be well served if teachers and students became engaged actively in efforts to explore and understand these trends, and to reclaim the right to define the purposes of our work and to shape the learning communities in which we come together. (p. 55)

Fortunately, this kind of reflective teaching and learning for adults is occurring in many organizations and events across the US and the world.

Educational Fronts for Local and Global Justice

Networks of adult educators who choose to resist neoliberal policies are in some of the larger cities of the US. They are made up of individuals who understand that progressive change can result only through grassroots organizing. Once a small group becomes organized, there is

the capacity to plan and deliver a myriad of actions: pressuring politicians, participating in direct actions, democratizing curricula and instruction.

The New York Collective of Radical Educators (NYCoRE) is a group of public school teachers and their allies in New York City that has worked for more than a decade to uphold education for social justice. NYCoRE in recent months welcomed a small group of adult educators to join its ranks. This new group participates in the larger organization's meetings and events while additionally holding its own organizing meetings. NYCoRE has an annual conference, and the group of adult educators made plans to have its own presentation and workshop for the conference in March of 2014.

Literacy for Social Justice Teacher Research Group, recently renamed Educators for Social Justice, is a group of educator-activists in St. Louis. Co-authors Rogers, Mosely, and Folkes (2009), in a qualitative study of the organization, reported that second graders in the classroom of a member worked in groups to role-play responses to Ford moving work from its local factory to other countries. Groups representing management, workers, and the community worked toward a solution. Also, the researchers found that adults in an ESOL program practiced problem posing. The instructor used photos and stories to develop a generative theme with students, who learned how diverse communities have joined together in the Civil Rights and Immigrants' Rights movements.

Such examples of K-12 teachers uniting with adult educators can serve to inspire more communities to do the same. These groups from different regions across the US then can join forces to oppose the federal policies that place education in a narrow function of human capital development. Since neoliberalism operates globally, it will take a global movement to counter it. In 2004, adult education scholars from the US, Latin America, and Southern Africa held a workshop titled "Global Issues: The Roles and Responsibilities of Adult Education." They developed a process: (1) create space and listen, (2) adopt a critical stance, (3) attend to policy, and (4) engage in collective learning and action. This four-step strategy needs to work on a global scale if adult educators wish to have a role in creating a more humane, democratic, and sustainable globalization (Merriam, 2010).

Conclusion: Becoming Scholar/Activist/Practitioners

Adult educators are unique in the field of education. Many are likely to have at least some students who are older than they. Adult students have much to say and to write about their life experiences as they study new and reviewed concepts. There are countless opportunities for instructor and students to find that their respective roles have blended into what Freire (2000) called the teacher-student and students-teachers. A similar sort of blending that I like to see is that of the scholar/activist/practitioner.

Gramsci (1971) developed his concept of the organic intellectual with the view of the working class producing its own leaders among scholars. This certainly applies to any community living under oppression. Adult learners today can become scholars – in formal or informal settings – of feminist theory, queer theory, critical race theory, or Marxian studies, just to name a few possibilities. Most students understand, in heart and mind, what it is like to

experience oppression in at least one form. If they meet and talk with each other about how each has experienced oppression, all are more likely to develop empathy toward each other's situations and struggles. When students join with instructors in emancipatory scholarship, there can be a qualitative enhancement of the credibility of the scholarly works that result. I might be a dedicated scholar of peace studies even though I never have fought in a war. If I gain the trust of members of Veterans for Peace, though, some might become willing to allow me to have a role in their scholarship work. All, then, are scholars, and each brings something important toward a shared purpose. Only a veteran, though, can emerge as an organic intellectual among peace scholars.

Being a critical scholar means also being an activist. The adult educator who teaches social justice but does not engage in the work is not genuine. The adult learner who enjoys learning about struggles for equity but fails to engage in them is complicit with the *status quo*. Lively classroom discussions about past and current social movements have a role, but they are powerless if they do not lead to action. Certainly, the adult education classroom is not the only venue for inspiring adults to take social action; however, there is a potential in the classroom to engage in discussions that lead to a problem-posing scenario. It helps to start with students' experiences when beginning study of a theme. For example, if I am instructing a unit on the Civil Rights Movement, the place to begin is with students' direct experiences with racism in the present. Using images of New York City's stop-and-frisk police policy in action might generate the will for students of color to speak. From there, working with critical readings can lead to a will to channel indignation into activism.

Being a scholar/activist is not enough. Being change-agent practitioners in our professional and personal lives completes the picture. Critical adult educators practice what they teach, and they bring their outside experiences into their teaching. Students in adult education, hopefully, take what they learn from a critical educator and become more effective as change agents in their workplaces, homes, and communities. All are transformed in this process, and all evolve as practitioners with passion, compassion, and action. Learning how neoliberalism leads to an inhumane, undemocratic, and unsustainable world can feel overwhelming. Finding practices in our daily lives to respect and build community takes a commitment of support among people. The adult education classroom can become a place for building community, and it has the potential to become a part of a social movement in progress or of one yet to emerge. When learners become scholar/activist/practitioners together, despite the aims of neoliberalism, the possibilities are as large as imaginations can allow.

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