Institutional Ethnography, Adult Education and Program Planning: A Contribution to Critical Research

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Abstract: Many adult educators approach education as a vehicle for social change in a politically contested environment. In this paper, I introduce institutional ethnography's analytic contribution to critical research in program planning, particularly in expanding our understanding of the mechanisms of power that operate in educational programs.

Many adult educators approach education as a vehicle for social change. However, adult education "is practiced in a highly charged political context, among a nexus of interconnected and interdependent social processes such as federal and state legislation, program funding and planning, literacy work, and employment training" (Wright & Rocco, 2007, p. 643). Much scholarly discussion about the political and social dimensions of adult education has revolved around program planning. Here, I argue for an institutional ethnographic approach to this research. Institutional ethnography is a program of critical inquiry that aims to discover how people's everyday activities are articulated to and coordinated by extended social relations that they are often not conscious of. I begin this paper by discussing the emergence of a planning model that focuses on the negotiation of power and interests in planners' work. Next, I introduce institutional ethnography in relation to this model, outlining its particular analytic contribution. Finally, I recount the findings of a study in an adult education setting to demonstrate how institutional ethnography expands our understanding of the mechanisms of power that operate in educational programs.

Scholars categorize the frameworks of program planning for adult education in various ways. Numerous technical rational frameworks describe idealized, linear models (Sork & Caffarella, 1989; Sork, 2010) that privilege skill-acquisition, technique, and quantitative evaluation. Cervero and Wilson's (1994; 1996; 2006) 'planning table model' grew in response to these frameworks and fuses critical analysis of the political and social realities in everyday processes with these instrumental approaches. They asserted that planners must act responsibility in the face of power and that they are only able to exercise agency when they understand the context in which their programs exist. A body of empirical research that used the 'planning table model' as a theoretical lens emphasized that program planning, and particularly the activity of 'negotiation,' inherently involves both individual and contextual factors. I briefly describe the evolution of their model and review this literature below.

Evolution of Cervero and Wilson's Socio-Political Model of Program Planning

Cervero and Wilson's scholarship is strongly influenced by urban planning theorist John Forester (1987, 1989, 1993) who emphasized that "planners routinely work to assess future choices, to think practically about who we shall become" (1989, p. xi). The planning table model was built from Forester's explorations of boundedly rational approaches to problem solving and decision making. Cervero and Wilson (1994) foregrounded the ethical importance of representing interests that may not be present at the planning table coupled with the practical

importance of learning skills of negotiation and leveraging power when necessary. They define power in planning contexts as the "capacity to act distributed to individual planners by virtue of the organizational and social positions which they occupy" (Cervero & Wilson, 1994, p. 254). Interests are defined as the complex predispositions, motivations and purposes leading people to act. Therefore, everyone involved in "planning a program exercise their power in accordance with their own concrete interests" (p. 255). They also note that planners' exercise of power is always contingent; negotiation is always involved among stakeholders and outcomes may not be predetermined. The stakeholders that Cervero and Wilson consider to always matter when planning educational programs include "learners, teachers, planners, institutional leadership, and the affected public" (p. 260).

Several case studies in adult education contexts that were influenced, at least in part, by Cervero and Wilson's scholarship varied in scope and focus, but all explored context, negotiation, power, and planner agency. This research emphasized that the process of planning, and particularly the activity of 'negotiation' inherently involves both individual and contextual factors. "[W]e cannot understand the acting subject, the planner, separate from the social circumstances because action takes place in the interaction between the two rather than in their separation" (Cervero & Wilson, 1994, p. 253). Examination of discrete individual factors may deal with the planners' skills and experiences but also delve more into the significance of subjective terrain. Context may be explored as situations within institutions, but also as broader and longer social and historical contexts beyond the bounds of the specific institution. These studies may be grouped into three broad categories based on individual and contextual factors. Hendricks (2001) and Mabry and Wilson (2000) examined how these factors contributed to planners' choice of tactics to influence planning situations. Their studies supported Cervero and Wilson's argument that a theory of context was necessary in order to develop an integrated understanding of planners and their settings. Watkins and Tisdell's (2006), Sandmann, et. al.'s (2009), and Bracken's (2010) studies revealed the significance of individual subjectivities and relational factors in planning contexts. How planners viewed themselves and put relational skills and intentions into practice were revealed to be important to their professional identities and the broader context. Finally, Maruatona and Cervero's (2004), Umble, Cervero, and Langone's (2001), and Sandlin and Cervero's (2003) studies each examined how programs and planners reproduced or resisted dominant power relations in the broader historical and social context.

An implication of centering on negotiation as the primary activity of planners is that Cervero and Wilson's model of program planning constrains research to the realm of planners' activity that they undertake consciously. This model describes a rational process through which planners make judgments at the planning table. Who is present (or absent) at the planning table matters in shaping the features of the programs and in maintaining or altering power relations. For example, Sandlin and Cervero's (2003) study explored how ideologies about work and education were enacted and negotiated in educational programs for welfare recipients, who obviously were not included in the design of these programs that affected their lives. The authors described the historical development of the political climate within the US, in which welfare has been cut back and adult education and training has been pulled into relation to workforce development. In the U.S. context, "education for unemployed people has been used for social control… to reproduce social inequality based on class, race, and gender, and …[has been assumed to be] a panacea to employment problems" (p. 250). Content analysis that closely examined conversations within classrooms revealed that teachers negotiated various ideas about work and welfare, but often upheld the dominant ideologies, especially in terms of viewing their

students' economic struggles as personal deficits. While they argued that critical agency and consciousness is shaped and constrained by larger structures, their focus was trained on the teachers' practice in the classroom, without revealing the relations that make this so. Despite "moments of resistance and questioning of dominant discourses…[they] defaulted to the programmes' official viewpoints and had the power to silence contradictory voices" (p. 263). The authors state that it will take "great effort" (p. 263) to push beyond dominant myths about race and class in America. The teachers failed, individually, to bring any challenge into the classroom negotiations. The analysis and critique, in this study, of the emphasis on individual deficit and educational solution is compromised by not clearly mapping the social relations from the local setting into the broader institutional dimensions.

Over time, Cervero and Wilson have openly reflected on their scholarship and practice and revised their ideas, especially in their attempts to theorize about the workings of power and clarify what they mean for program planners to 'act responsibly' in our precariously democratic society. Wilson and Nesbit (2005) have together examined different interpretations of what power is and how it works. They acknowledged that there is a need for a better explanatory analysis of mechanisms of power and not simply descriptions of the consequences of power in operation: "theorists can identify the workings of power in their practice but struggle with theorizing concretely about those workings" (unpaginated). Cervero and Wilson (2006) further refined their definitions of responsible problem solving and decision making in *Working the Planning Table* to mean 'ethical commitment to democratic principles'; again calling attention to the gap between those who benefit and those who should benefit from the educational program. And later, they discussed their belief in 'participatory decision-making' (2010) practices as a concrete expression of this commitment to democratic principles. While these writings offer direction for a critical practice of program planning, there remains a need to explicate the workings of power in the everyday.

Contribution of Institutional Ethnography to Adult Education Research

To embark on institutional ethnography is to map and explore power by discovering how one's knowing is organized, by what social forces and relations, of which we may not be conscious. Institutional ethnography, from now on referred to as IE, has roots in the women's movement, Marx, ethnomethodology, and phenomenology (Grahame & Grahame, 2007). It is a publicly engaged method of inquiry that grew out of Dorothy Smith's (1987, 1990, 1999, 2005, 2006) lifelong intellectual work to understand and theorize about forms of knowledge. There are two primary aims of IE. One is to produce accessible accounts of the institutional complexes that we take part in on a daily basis, thus "re-organiz(ing) the social relations of knowledge of the social so people can take that knowledge up as an extension of our ordinary knowledge of the local actualities of our lives" (Smith, 2005, p. 29). Investigating how the social is put together, how things work and come to be as they are, must produce knowledge about the workings of society that makes sense and can be used practically. The second aim is to reveal the mechanisms of power operating through institutional complexes, also known as ruling relations. The innovation of the term ruling relations "was intended as a move beyond the related concepts of power and the state" (Bisaillon, 2012, p. 618). Ruling relations are objectified forms of consciousness and organization that generate "specialized systems of concepts, theories, categories, technical language" (Smith, 1996, p. 47) that shape how we understand the world. They may also be understood as textually-mediated social relations. Social relations are the conceptual heart of institutional ethnography referring to "sequences of interdependent actions

that shape people's daily practices. The interplay of social relations constitutes social organization that connects people's immediate worlds to places beyond" (Bisaillon, 2012, p. 619). It is important to note that the use of the term institution does not refer to particular organizations. Rather, "institution" is meant to direct "the researcher's attention to coordinated and intersecting work processes taking place in multiple sites" (DeVault & McCoy, 2006, p. 17).

      A valuable contribution that institutional ethnography could make to the study of program planning is to show how planners, educators, and learners participate, both consciously and unconsciously, in enacting social relations that are mediated by institutions. Data collection within institutional ethnography would explore the planner's world of activities, in order to reveal how things actually work and come to be as they are, and to raise to consciousness the sometimes unintentional consequences of the work people engage in. Institutions play a ubiquitous, often hidden role in mediating and coordinating everyday life across space and time. These processes hinder or enhance the democratic potential of the programs we plan. An institutional ethnographic approach to inquiry may address Wilson and Nesbit's (2005) call for better explication of the mechanisms of power and may also serve as a component of the analytical project that is so important to critical approaches. Institutional ethnography certainly has overlapping concerns with Cervero and Wilson and specifically provides insight into 1) the social organization of knowledge, 2) the practices of ideology, 3) text-mediated processes, and 4) extra-local coordination and concerting of action. For the purposes of strengthening this argument, I will take a closer look here at one institutional ethnography that focused on a government-mandated program review, undertaken every five years, of three Canadian community college programs for the training of staff and medical office assistants. During this time, competency-based curriculum measures were introduced and touted as "a means to make educational goals more explicit, instructional methods more effective, and educational institutions more accountable" (Jackson, 1995, p. 164). I chose this study, in particular, because the intent and substance of the research is a critique of dominant techno-rational processes of program planning, but from a perspective not yet seen in the empirical studies reviewed above.

      There are three ways that the story uncovered in this research could have been told, the first two being similar to studies focusing on negotiation of power and interests among stakeholders. These include an analytical version that could have focused on how decision-making power over curriculum shifted from the teachers to the administration. At a broader policy level, another version could have shown how program priorities became more accountable to public policy goals that served the needs of industry rather than individual learners. But the contribution of this study, and the institutional ethnographic approach to inquiry, was an analysis concerned with the social organization of knowledge, "directed to somewhat more technical questions about the actual mechanisms through which such sweeping changes are effected in an institutional environment" (p. 165). These seemingly local, technical questions were located within a broader historical framework of the reorganization of social relations of capital, where a transformation of institutional governance has been occurring across all sectors.

      What came into focus in this study was an analysis of texts, not in a discursive sense, but rather the use and discussion about the texts, through 'everyday working language' (p. 168). Much of the study looked at various documentary processes introduced through competency-based curriculum reform, especially the 'task analysis,' a document familiar to instructional designers, that strives to make an 'objective' statement of needs and requirements. This study uncovered layers of nearly invisible transformations through the centrality of this task analysis, how the documents became a 'stand-in' for workplace reality, authority over the curriculum

process was invested within the documents, and the documents became actors. "[T]he task analysis 'will get things done'" (p. 171). Even as the instructors were invited into the curriculum revision process, their own knowledge and skills were displaced through decision-making mandated through documents, removing the decision makers from view and coordinating instructors' participation in the circumscribing of their own area of expertise. The importance of such a study is in exposing the contradictions that we live with everyday unknowingly, and in explicating the mechanisms through which it happens.

Cervero, Wilson and Smith share a common belief that the world is social and the only way we can be in the everyday world is as social beings (Cervero & Wilson, 2001; Smith, 1987; 2005). Institutional ethnography recognizes that people's motivations and intentions are often superceded by intangible institutional processes. I believe the application of an institutional ethnographic approach to the study of adult education can only advance our knowledge of what actually happens and how ideology is enacted within educational programs. Adult educators who are serious about educating for social change will benefit from this inquiry.

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