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Adult Education as Social Education Revisited: The Contribution of John Ohliger

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Abstract: In this paper we turn to the scholarship and grassroots educational, social, and cultural work of John Ohliger to suggest that his politics of adult education provide useful insights for revitalizing adult education in neoliberal times when lifelong learning is advanced as the more desirable commodity.

John often joked that an adult educator was someone who knew how to arrange chairs in a circle. Of course, that is symbolic of what he did best: create an environment in which people felt inspired and free to talk about any topic as self-directed and collegial learners. John often told me that he was not a good teacher, which meant that traditional lecturing was not his best skill. He certainly did not like things like grading either. Still, his students really loved him and learned so much, I think, because he encouraged them to question and explore the subject before them. He made learning joyous, individual, and voluntary. By individual, I do not mean solitary. I mean that each person found his or her own path in exploring a topic.

Chris, John Ohliger's wife (Wagner, 2009, pp. 323-324)

Since the early 1990s, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has spearheaded educational policy initiatives focused on lifelong and life-wide learning (Grace, 2004, 2005). These initiatives emphasize a new instrumentality and vocationalism, both of which are tied to advancing the knowledge and global economies that have emerged in recent decades under neoliberalism. Within these economies, knowledge is reduced to information, thus devaluing it and making it variously transferrable, replaceable, and disposable. In this milieu, the space and place of adult education appears tenuous. Indeed, in a global learning culture that has become preoccupied with the OECD's buzz phrase *lifelong learning for all*, adult education faces the challenge of clarifying and fortifying its parameters at a time when the field requires renewal of its direction amid the educational new wave of interest in lifelong learning (Grace, 2006). In this paper, we turn to the scholarship and grassroots educational, social, and cultural work of John Ohliger to suggest that his politics of adult education, variously grounded in liberal, radical, and critical perspectives, are useful to revitalize adult education as a field of study and practice in neoliberal times when lifelong learning is advanced as the more desirable commodity. As we celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Adult Education Research Conference, it is timely and appropriate to draw on the work of Ohliger to think about possibilities for adult education as a field of study and practice. His fifty-year career in the field is largely synchronous with the emergence of the conference as a site to discuss matters of context, disposition, and relations of power affecting education and learning for adults. From the late 1950s when he completed a Master of Arts in Adult Education at the University of California until his death in 2004, Ohliger was a social theorist, educator, activist, practitioner, cultural worker, and prolific writer who provided theoretical and practical lenses to examine the emergence of North American adult education (Grace & Rocco, 2009).

As Ohliger provided perspectives on what he felt ought to constitute adult education as a field focused on learning for adults, he offered critiques of mandatory continuing education and professionalization as he proposed what adult education and lifelong learning ought to be about as democratic and ethical learning sites (Rocco, 2009). Ohliger wanted these educational formations to remember the history of social education and its emphasis on voluntary learning. He also wanted them to focus on meeting the holistic—instrumental, social, *and* cultural—needs of ordinary citizens mediating the intricacies of life, learning, and work. Ohliger’s work has meaning and value today as education struggles in the wake of the effects of neoliberalism (Giroux, 2004). As neoliberal governments meld the social and the economic, usually placing fiscal responsibility before public responsibility, education is constricted and often reduced to instrumental, commodified forms (Grace, 2004, 2005, 2006). In this milieu, engaging Ohliger’s contributions to theorizing and practice can help us to interrogate privatized forms of adult and higher education tied to corporatism and fulfilling economic agendas (Grace, 2009). This engagement can also help us to problematize contemporary formations of adult education and lifelong learning within a politics of hope and possibility. Such a politics challenges us to develop pedagogical projects that intersect instrumental learning intended to help advance economies with social and cultural learning intended to help build community, create space and place, and revitalize education for citizenship. To cast these projects as learning for adults that recalls the historical as it revitalizes the social and the cultural, we can glean much from Ohliger’s longstanding political and pedagogical project to challenge citizens as educators, learners, and workers who need to clarify social and political options in relation to life, learning, and work (Grace & Rocco, 2009). Taking Ohliger’s radical liberal project into contemporary times can assist adult learners to make basic choices that have meaning in neoliberal times when systemic and institutional forces aid and abet dominant political and economic interests (Grace, 2004, 2005, 2009).

Knowing John: Writing *Challenging the Professionalization of Adult Education*

In 2003 we began a journey that was not only an intellectual odyssey to capture what John Ohliger contributed to adult education as a field of study and practice, but also a personal and meaningful encounter in self-directed social learning for each of us. John would be pleased that we engaged his life as an organic intellectual, a social advocate, and a cultural worker in this way. He always believed that learning had to be a contextual and relational experience that mediated disposition—attitudes, values, and beliefs—toward learning and was close to the ground (Grace & Rocco, 2009). He had little time for intellectualizing that disconnected the study of adult education from its everyday practice. This is not to say that John was inattentive to theory building. In fact John was passionate about theory both as a builder and a de-structor of its formations and meanings (Ohliger, 1980). However, when he turned to theorizing, he placed theory in dynamic equilibrium with practice. He also brought the social, historical, political, and other foundational aspects of adult education to bear on practice and possibilities for its transformation. In all his work to engage adult education in the intersection of theory and practice, John focused on the plight of ordinary people who mediated life, learning, and work amid social, cultural, political, and economic change forces over which they had little or no control. From this perspective, he offered this critique of academic adult education, problematizing both its radical and mainstream constituencies:

If academic adult education overlooks the manner in which its “clients” are structured by the socio-economic order, then advocates of some of the radical alternatives are

sometimes guilty of believing that by fostering education as an institution less dependent on that order, people can thereby be liberated from the effects of that order. But the fact remains that so long as people must earn their livelihood in this society, regardless of what kind of exotic education they may seek, they are still subject to many of the same kinds of pressures and conditioning that force adults back to school for certification, lead them to the endless pursuit of courses in self improvement, and support their continued dependence on specialists. Like a specter over the cultural horizon, the pervasive technological and economic order clouds even the most Utopian aspirations for education. ... Unfortunately, in their search for legitimacy [in this order], many [mainstream] adult educators translate their desire to do a good “professional” job all too easily into the desire to make their clients into professionals; that is, to help adults acquire the credentials to “make it” in the system or to fulfill the institutional requirements of society. (Ohliger, 1980, pp. 51-52)

John was a realist who understood the power of ideology and economic change forces and the limits of adult education in their wake. He did not have blind faith in adult education as a panacea for people’s problems and a conduit to end oppression. He detested the professionalization of the field as adult education’s will to power, and he was critical of advocates of specialism and optimists who saw a turn to techno-scientism as a cure-all for addressing the ills of society as well as the ills of adult education in its undervalued institutionalized form. John wanted adult education to be holistic education that attended to instrumental, social, *and* cultural learning needs so people could not only eat, but also have the potential to live full and free lives. In striving to create a more encompassing field of study and practice, John hoped that adult educators would evolve as humble, caring cultural workers and advocates for ordinary people as they shaped a field composed of self-directed, socially conscious learners. John practiced a politics and pedagogy of radical liberalism soaked in hope as he did his part to create this field (Grace & Rocco, 2009). His politics and pedagogy challenge us to take this task into the present moment so we, as adult educators, are there for every learner.

How did John shape a transgressive brand of social education within his politics and pedagogy of radical liberalism? He turned to history to learn from John Dewey and Eduard Lindeman, both liberals who valued education as a social project. He also turned to contemporaries whom he considered mentors: Ivan Illich, Everett Reimer, and Paulo Freire. These intellectuals deeply influenced Ohliger’s (1974) politics of adult education, shaping it as a politics of resistance whereby adult educators “within standard brand institutions ... need to resist, and to loosen, the economic and bureaucratic controls that stifle us all” (p. 55). Following Freire, Ohliger believed that adult educators “outside the establishment, or at its fringes, ... need to work with individuals and groups who are moving toward an awareness of political and economic oppression and are acting against it” (p. 55). Following Illich and Reimer, Ohliger valued cultural education as a way to mediate political forces. He described cultural education as “living/learning as individuals, in small groups, or new communities as examples of, or seeds for, a future society in which what is now called ‘less’ will be recognized as ‘more’” (p. 55). Ohliger’s politics of education, influenced by radical and critical thought, valued ordinary people:

We are *not* inadequate, insufficient, or inferior losers, although political, economic, and educational institutions so define us and their leaders try to convince us that we are impotent in the face of rapid change and must adapt to it. We are working perhaps in different ways for a radically new society, directed toward individual freedom without

chaos and social justice, without meritocracy—and we are enjoying life as we pursue a humanistic revolution. (p. 55)

Turning to the Social Activism, Cultural Work, and Scholarship of John Ohliger to Challenge the Professionalization of Adult Education

John Ohliger was a prolific writer, bibliographer, and archivist who contributed to field scholarship as a graduate student and academic adult educator. Perhaps more importantly though, he continued to contribute during the decades after he left academe and co-founded Basic Choices (Grace & Rocco, 2009). Ultimately, John moved forward solo with Basic Choices, which he developed as a public pedagogical project in which he assumed roles including social educator, writer, bibliographer, collaborator, networker, social activist, and cultural worker. Fortunately for our field of study and practice, John left an encompassing record of his life and educational and cultural work. His archive includes personal correspondence, personal papers, his unpublished memoir, and a rich personal research-and-practice database informative to academics, graduate students, policymakers, educators, and practitioners interested in a holistic social practice of adult education. It also includes his published work, which is voluminous and includes journal articles, monographs, and bibliographies on diverse topics of value to those with interests in adult education and lifelong learning. His eclectic contributions to field scholarship include his critiques of mandatory continuing education as a tool of the establishment, of lifelong learning as a mechanism for controlling citizens as learners and workers, and of critical adult education as an idealistic project that he felt was out of touch with modern practice (Grace & Rocco, 2009).

Ohliger's body of work and range of interests are explored and analyzed in our book *Challenging the Professionalization of Adult Education: John Ohliger and Contradictions in Modern Practice* (Grace & Rocco, 2009). Contributors comprise an eclectic group of adult educators, social activists, and cultural workers who knew John personally or who came to know John through his scholarship and work as a popular educator. Each knew the man that his wife Chris described in the quote that opens this paper. All grappled with the complexities and idiosyncrasies that marked the man as a multi-faceted, caring but sometimes contrary organic intellectual and radical social educator who passionately shared his social philosophy, pedagogy, and practice of social education; ethical perspectives on field practices; critiques of mandatory forms of adult and continuing education; critical and alternative educational practices; and holistic and inclusive social forms of adult education (Grace & Rocco, 2009). Collectively, contributors to the book provide a complex and multifocal lens for analyzing our contemporary roles as adult educators as we investigate how John operated in the fray of institutional and other sociocultural contexts that shaped field agendas and priorities over the decades in which he practiced.

In sum, Ohliger's perspectives and ideas have the potential to help a new generation of educators and learners to (a) theorize historical and contemporary designs of adult education and (b) implement a socially conscious practice of adult education. His critiques have a timeless quality and value to them. Collectively, they provide a solid underpinning for making basic choices about learning for life and work in contemporary times when advanced techno-scientism, individualism, neoliberalism, competition, privatization, and globalization constitute cultural change forces dictating what learning has most worth. We contend that Ohliger's body of work provides educators and learners with a rich and layered resource for critical analysis and communicative learning. A turn to his work can help us scrutinize the study and practice of adult education in our broadly construed field with its multiple sources of knowledge and competing

interests. It can help us investigate the space and place of lifelong learning as an entity with two faces: one as an instrument of social control and one as a focal point for social education and cohesion. And, for those of us concerned with adult education's current value in institutional and community settings, a turn to Ohliger's work provides much food for thought as we take up an important contemporary question: In a learning-and-work world driven by economic and instrumental concerns, how might adult educators also address social and cultural concerns to provide more holistic and inclusive social education for adults? Ohliger was concerned with this more holistic provision of adult education throughout his career. For Ohliger, true adult education could be nothing less.

Toward a Durable Better Society

John's work under the auspices of Basic Choices, which he started as an adult-learning forum in Madison, Wisconsin in 1976 to enable his work as a free-lance adult educator and independent researcher, is not known like the work of those he considered mentors including John Dewey, Eduard Lindeman, Ivan Illich, Everett Reimer, and Paulo Freire. Hopefully, *Challenging the Professionalization of Adult Education* will be a medium for helping adult educators and learners to discover the work of this social democrat who became an eclectic organic intellectual who relished dialogue about people, politics, and ideas shaping adult education and lifelong learning. Like his mentors, Ohliger worked to make a better world. This is evident in the following proclamation that he and his Basic Choices' colleagues issued valuing voluntary learning and living for a free society (Basic Choices, 1982).

To work toward the durable better society, which we seek, and to counteract these trends, we therefore propose to join together, and invite others to join us in these activities:

- Research on the extent of these trends and the structural basis for their growth through new forms of critical analysis, examining especially the links between the political, economic, technological, and cultural dimensions.
- To search for, encourage, and work with positive alternatives for human learning at every level: individual, friendship, family, neighborhood, institutional, local, state, national, and international.
- To engage in collective political action and work with others. This action should include raising basic issues for public discussion in these and other contexts: 1. Opposing laws and pressures for mandatory continuing education in general, and certification, credentialing, and professionalization in adult education. 2. At the same time, working toward true public accountability and the growth of genuine personal and social competence. (p. 274)

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