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Oral Histories to Support Growing Democracy: Stories from the NYC Adult Literacy Community

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Keywords: adult literacy, oral history, critical pedagogy, popular education

Abstract: This oral history project chronicled narratives from the NYC adult literacy community in an attempt to preserve the field's public collective historical memory. These narratives, countering dominant ideologies, explicitly connect adult literacy to human rights struggles, can support the field in a larger collective conversation rooted in sustainable democratic practices.

Introduction

Freire (1970) says society cannot integrate people into the current structures of oppression but instead transform those structures in order to change the world. In NYC, and throughout the United States, adult literacy has been redefined minus any connections to human rights or social justice education; instead it is colonized solely as a tool for workforce development agendas (Macedo, 1994). This fight against the direction of the field is not only to preserve students' rights but aimed at transforming the structures of society in equitable ways. (Shor, 1987). Memories of adult literacy's history involving struggles for basic human rights and equity are receding at lightning speed. This study chronicled narratives from the NYC adult literacy community that explicitly connect literacy to social change and democracy, in an effort to preserve the field's collective historical memory. These stories, rooted in educational practices of Myles Horton, Paulo Freire, and other grassroots political educators, honor people being able to read both words and worlds, and support classrooms in becoming potential sites of transformation. This study can contribute to a larger collective conversation aimed at sustainable democratic practice, by addressing larger socio-political inequities that continue to be perpetuated by the dominant culture. These counter-narratives, grounded in participatory ideologies, don't seek to integrate people into current structures of domination but instead strive to subvert and transform landscapes of power into liberatory sites filled with hope and possibility (Auerbach, 1991; Freire, 1970). Through engaging in pedagogies of resistance, we can reclaim adult literacy's roots and become sustainable spaces driven by social justice interests (Macedo, 1994). The primary questions guiding this study were:

- What narratives can be elicited, from the NYC adult literacy community that explicitly situate practice within a struggle for human rights and social justice?
- What role can these narratives play in preserving the field's historical memory of adult literacy being connected to social justice education?

Theoretical Framework

The counter-narratives from this study represent, at their core, critiques of dominant ideologies. Unpacking power inequities speak explicitly to critical theory, which highlights the ways in which capitalism pushes people into playing dehumanizing roles, which limits their abilities to become actors and authors in their own histories. This dynamic perpetuates legacies of economic/racial/gender oppressions (Brookfield, 2005). Freire (1970) called for people to

interrupt dominant scripts and rewrite roadmaps of power. Phyllis Cunningham (2005) says, if as a society we're to hold any hope of a democratic, more equitable future we must be able to facilitate the right of those voices and perspectives that have been marginalized or ignored to gain meaningful access at the decision-making table. Shor (1987) states that currently, a human underclass is being perpetuated with no space to honor organic intellectuals. Boggs (1998) adds, as members of a transformed society, we need to leap to a new stage of being a more *human* human being. Recognizing the damage that a highly developed capitalist system has done to the humanity of its members, there must be a responsibility to create strategies to transform ourselves into human beings....a struggle not only against the external enemy but also the enemy within (pg. 151-152).

Research Design

Oral histories offer people opportunities to become actors in a historical script which they themselves author. Locally constructed knowledge, which honors shifting realities regarding notions of truth, was clearly the most appropriate research methodology to chronicle these counter-stories. Thompson (2000) points out that when community knowledge is honored, opportunities open up to recover experiences of the silenced and offer new ways of understanding histories of marginalized groups. This can access powerful spaces of inquiry and possibility. The cooperative nature of documenting oral histories can lead to radical questioning of knowledge production in our society. Whose voices ultimately prevail? Blaise (1993) suggests that people's stories make us into world travelers. We learn (if only sometimes temporarily) to live in each other's countries, speak each other's language, negotiate each other's streets, and turn our keys in each other's locks. Coles (1989) reminds us that stories are all we carry with us in our journeys, and we owe it to each other to honor and learn from them.

Despite the democratic intentions of oral history methodology and its efforts to honor people's pluralistic realities, their processes, lives and input; as a researcher, I am deeply aware of issues of power and fluidity in the construction and compilation of texts. How and where are we as researchers situated in the personal narratives we collect and analyze? In transcriptions, when we determine and insert punctuation, in what ways are we altering meanings? To what extent does our presence alter what people say and how they say it? Like Gluck (1991), I was cognizant that this historical document was shaped by my intervention and lens, in all of its limitations and shortcomings. In addition to interviews, other sources of data included observations, artifacts, field notes, and document reviews.

The following section excerpts, in a partial way that can't nearly do justice to the complexity of Calvin's narrative, an example of one of the counter-narratives from this study. It explores Calvin Miles's trajectory and education. Calvin was a powerful student leader in New York City, the board president of VALUE ((Voices for Adult Literacy United to Educate - the only national adult learner organization in the United States), one of the first adult learners to be on staff at a literacy organization in NYC, and a member of many advisory boards in adult literacy. He was also working with on leadership development with students at The Open Book, a Freirian inspired former adult literacy program in NYC. My dissertation chronicled the history of this program, partly through participants' voices. Tragically, Calvin died on January 22, 2009. His contribution to the adult literacy field was extraordinary. He was undoubtedly in it for the long haul.

Findings

We May be Off the Farm but we Still are Farmers (Calvin's Early Life)

I grew up in a small town in rural North Carolina. My family has always been farmers, that's all they knew. We may be off the farm but we still are farmers. We was planting things, growing vegetables, and fishing. That's what helped them to survive because my great grandmother came off the reservation in the thirties when they was moving Native Americans off the land and taking them out to live in the desert. Part of my family is not just black, part of my family is Native American too. We been here a long time, before even the whites came. There was 12 of us and the whole family worked on a farm. On the farm when you sharecrop, you would supply the labor and the whites supplied the land. But the man kept the books. He not going to tell you where he put all his books. He tell you, 'well, you didn't make no money this year,' and you don't get nothing. There was a lot of that going on. I mean they really robbed a lot of black peoples out of their money. Sharecropping, a friend of mine told me, was one step up from being a slave, because you worked for nothing, the kids didn't get educated, you know, you are never respected as a real, productive businessman. My father never got the respect he deserved for being a farmer. My father was a big farmer. He did great things for this country but that kinds of things don't get into the paper; they don't get into the news, in the books...

You Didn't Have no Rights! (Race and Education)

We had to walk to school. The white kids rode the bus. Roundtrip it had to be about five miles everyday and sometimes it be cold; we sat there half a day before it warm up. One teacher had three classes. The teacher couldn't get to everybody, it was impossible. People fell through the crack big time. Some people learned, but it was very hard. And then some people had to leave school to be on the farm. When you went back, it was hard to focus. They taught you Dick and Jane and you know you ain't never gonna have a picket fence, or a white powder dog... It was scary growing up in that time. Certain places you couldn't go. Your mother and father would tell you, you can't go there because you know white people don't want you there. And what made it so bad, you start accepting it, because your mother and father taught you to accept it. They needed for you not to get into trouble because if you get into trouble they may get throwed off the land and you don't have no place to live. You didn't see yourself as a human being, you saw yourself as somebody who creates some problems, you was a problem. I'm not saying people wasn't complaining and doing things, but it was just the norm. That's how bad it was, you just accepted it. School was important but it was more important to work on the farm. The farm was the livelihood of the family. The whites closed the school because they didn't want black kids to go to school with white kids. Black kids had to go to the farm because the farm was important to the economy. In the sixties when big businesses came and brought all these big machines, it pushed a lot of people off the farm... So a person like myself, there was no work for me. People my age came to NY, to live, to find jobs, to work. We came with a lot of working skills, but we didn't come with good reading or writing skills, because the school system was not that great. Coming to a literacy program, all I needed was somebody to teach me to read. I didn't come asking the teacher, 'What am I gonna read about?' When he asked me what I want to learn, I laid it on the table because I had learned so much without even knowing how to read.

We Need an Adult Literacy Movement (Organizing and Student Leadership)

I was involved in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, a school up in East New York where in the sixties we was trying to get parents and some teachers to be in charge of the school. To take responsibility to make the school a community based program. That was the beginning of helping parents to be more involved in the schools and they did. That was in the early seventies when people was really involved in the schools on all kinds of levels. Some was involved in trying to get hired black principals and get more black teachers in the schools because black people wasn't involved in the school system as much. Eventually we realized you should get somebody who really understand the community...

I remember in the eighties we were at a conference up in Lehman College and students was all in a big room talking. One thing that caught my interest was when Basemah (one of the students from The Open Book) said to the group, 'you know we interview our teachers.' I said to myself, this is cool. We started meeting at The Open Book because I think it was more free and Basemah had access. Students would feel comfortable. We had some pretty good meetings up there. We were trying to get students to be more involved in their programs, to talk about some of the stuff we could do together. Even though the Open Book was honest and open for people to be able to talk, students still hesitated sometimes because ain't no-one ever asked peoples to voice their opinion before like Open Book. But the teachers knew certain things they could do to get students involved. Teachers got people to do newsletters and go out to the community, interviewing folks. Later on at the literacy program I worked, we started interviewing teachers. We got a group of students who wanted to do it and they came up with questions what they wanted to ask their teacher. We got that from the Open Book. Then I started doing workshops on reading with children. I had been in district 13 trying to get mothers and fathers to be involved in the school system before I learned to read. So I had some experience working with groups of parents and also working with groups of peoples on committees. I was interested because I was thinking about my own history of not being able to read and write. I always said if my father, even though he might not have been a good reader, but if he sat down with me and just held the book, I probably would have learned to read. Then I would know how valuable it was to read. I knew a lot of folks come to programs don't know how to read but they can tell stories from pictures. So we decided to get some children books and get a group of people and just talk about the pictures in the book. And when they go home, just practice, just tell the story from the picture, don't worry about the words. Now, my basic role is how to get students to see they can organize themselves so they can have more of a voice about what is happening in the literacy community. Students can communicate with students much better than teachers, they see things differently. I think if the Open Book had been open today, you would have had one of the strongest groups coming out of that school. I thought they was on the right track of developing strong student leadership. It just felt good when you went to the program, I felt like I could do anything I wanted to do there. One thing we have not done is help students to organize students. We have to be able to let students figure this stuff out for themselves. We did it on a small scale. I know programs don't have a lot of resources but this is what we should be fighting for. More money to develop students to be all that they want to be. The civil rights movement didn't start with everybody involved. It started on a small scale and worked its way to everybody. We need an adult literacy movement across the country. We need to say that we are not going to accept you giving little dabs of

money. You need to give us money before we can be able to do the things we doing. Right now we're not seen as valuable. We're seen as failures. That's got to change. More students need to be leaders, and they need to tell their stories. Programs have to trust students. They should not think they are trying to destroy the program. One of the worst things in the field now is that students are not talking to each other. The literacy community need to get together and work better together. We need to stop undermining each other and start putting folks in that's really doing it from the heart. In the South they wanted to keep people separate. And they did a good job. Now, it's embedded in people's minds. We are still separated. We need to understand each other and to find out we have the same thing in common. We know adult education is being mistreated by the country. When I first got involved in literacy, I felt good because I thought I was doing something good for the benefit of mankind. But now I see it as peoples telling us what to do in this field. We're not working the system, the system is working us. We got folks that don't know nothing about the field telling us what we should be doing and its not fair. We should take the field back. As long as I'm living, I will be fighting for this cause.

Discussion/Implications

Adult literacy largely represents a quest for basic human rights and agency with groups. Calvin says that the field must work in solidarity, engaged in a collective struggle towards a more democratic society. Calvin frames the conversation in ways that bring larger institutionalized inequities to the fore. He speaks of the almost impossible odds of succeeding in school in the South. Why replicate principles of a K-12 system, based on the industrialized factory model when adult literacy offers powerful testimonials it doesn't work for entire communities? Heaney (2007) says, we've reduced adult literacy to a technical problem in need of a technical solution (by experts). By operationalizing literacy, there is no space for community empowerment models that can foster sustainable change and redistribution of power in equitable ways. This landscape divorces the field from its historical roots. History has repeatedly demonstrated that the only possibility for poor people to effect change is in large numbers, through social movements (Heaney, 2007). Calvin also points out the danger of students not talking with each other. This prevents people working together in solidarity and ensures status quo. In the current reductionistic climate of adult literacy that privileges dehumanizing and revisionist versions of history, there is an urgent need for counter-narratives that are grounded in different sets of realities and possibilities. Today the public historical memory of adult literacy is being re-written minus any connections to a democratic, just world. Oral histories can offer students space to re-write dominant scripts and tell their complex, fluid lived realities on their own terms. At its core, student leadership is a quest for equity and shared governance. This struggle cannot be prostituted, colonized, or domesticated. It cannot be rooted in dominant, paternalistic, and charitable ideologies. Like democratic practice, student leadership, involves being able to re-imagine and move beyond fixed definitions or frameworks to re-negotiate and re-envision new alternatives. This quest to transform society can only be rooted in solidarity. Calvin rightly points out that currently as a field, we're not seen as valuable. We must, as a society, overcome our cultural aversion towards entire groups of people and challenge notions of imperialism and privilege in our struggle towards justice for everyone. Calvin talks about the need for an adult literacy movement in this country. This explicitly situates adult literacy in the midst of social movements. As adult literacy workers, we must make space for fragile democratic experiments which can foster human agency. How can we collectively disentangle and disengage our current

ways of being and living in the world, and open windows in our psyches that honor collective responsibility and humane, democratic possibilities? Horton (1991) states, the answers can only come from the people. We must listen to what students have to say and find ways in programs to reflect and build on those words, dreams, hopes, and desires. Maxine Greene (2003) adds that we need to learn to live and labor in the spaces and possibilities between freedom and imagination – to make present what is absent, to summon up a condition that is not yet.

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