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Closing session: Putting Jack Mezirow's Ideas into Context

Michael Newman

Keywords: humanism, socialism

Abstract: The author argues that all adult education theory is either humanist or socialist. He reviews some of Jack Mezirow's ideas with this idea in mind.

Introduction

I have two doctor friends, both retired. She was as a general practitioner. He was a renal specialist. We see each other socially, and one evening I made a remark about the amount of knowledge doctors needed to retain.

"Maybe," the specialist said, "but medicine is really very simple. Illnesses are either hereditary, or caused by an infection."

"All of them?" I said.

"All of them," the generalist said.

Humanism and socialism

The conversation encouraged me to go looking for an analogous underlying simplicity in my own field. And I found it: all theory and practice in adult education is either humanist or socialist.

Of course, nothing is simple. The terms *humanism* and *socialism* are widely used as if their meanings were crystal clear but, when we look into matters closely, the meanings are blurry. To define the terms, then, I have gone to two texts from the Oxford University Press series of Very Short Introductions: *Humanism* by Stephen Law (2011), and *Socialism* by Michael Newman (2005).

Immediately I have to digress to make clear that I am not talking about myself here, but about another Michael Newman. The author of this excellent introduction to socialism may have the same name as me (and some kindred ideas) but he is English (I think) and I am Australian. He writes on politics, and I write about adult education. To avoid further confusion in this article written by me, the Australian Michael Newman, I will refer to OZ Newman (that's me) and UK Newman (that's him).

To pick up where I left off, Stephen Law argues that the boundaries of humanism are "elastic", but that a number of generalisations can be made. Humanists promote freedom of thought, and maintain that no beliefs should be considered off-limits to rational scrutiny. They argue for forms of education "that stress our moral autonomy and the importance of thinking critically". They focus on "the big questions", such as what makes life worth living, what is morally right or wrong, and how best to order society. And they are keen to establish positive alternatives to moral, political and social dogma. Humanists believe that this life is the only one we have, and are sceptical about the claim that a god exists (Law, 2011, pp. 5-6).

UK Newman describes socialism as a "diverse phenomenon", whose "most fundamental characteristic … is its commitment to the creation of an egalitarian society". Socialists "may not have agreed about the extent to which inequality can be eradicated or the means by which change can be effected, but no socialist would defend the current inequalities of wealth and power" (2005, pp. 2-3). In all the variations of socialism, UK Newman argues, there is "a common emphasis on equality, cooperation and social solidarity" (2005, p. 30).

From Law, I get the sense that, although humanism may concern itself with society, its focus is on developing the rational, open-minded, morally literate individual in that society. From UK Newman, I take the idea that socialism describes a collective effort to establish a just society. The two philosophies may not be mutually exclusive, but they differ radically in emphasis.

The 19th century

A potted history of humanism in adult education might start with the establishment of mechanics institutes in Britain in the 1820s. These provided classes and lectures to help working people understand the new sciences that were changing their lives. The founders of the movement were philanthropic members of the upper-middle class. They banned the study of politics, and encouraged the institutes to provide "useful knowledge" that would help individual members make their way in the world.

In the 1850s a number of colleges for working people were founded, again by middle-class philanthropists. This time the emphasis was on the intellectual development of college members through the study of literature, history and art. F. D. Maurice, the driving force behind the establishment of the London Working Men's College in 1854, said the college's role was to provide the "best and highest knowledge".

In the 1870s the first university extra-mural courses appeared. These were aimed at people—working-class men, and both working- and middle-class women—who were otherwise unable to access university-level education.

In 1903 the Workers' Educational Association was founded, this time organized on a democratic model. (Albert Mansbridge, one of the founders, used his wife's housekeeping money to float the organisation!) The WEA provided its own program of liberal adult education (this time including politics and economy), and also hosted university extra-mural classes.

I see all these initiatives as humanist, aimed at people defined by social class, yes, but concerned with the enrichment of individuals from that class.

From the beginning there was opposition from people variously described as Chartists (seeking parliamentary reform), Owenites (forming co-operative communities), Radicals, and trade unionists. These people organised lectures and debates in halls and coffee shops, and argued for "an independent working-class education" that would promote "*really* useful knowledge". By this they meant economic and political knowledge that would enable them to examine, for example, why there continued to be such poverty amidst the creation of such wealth.

People working for an independent working-class education wanted to put to rights the evident injustices of the 19th century, and so I see them as socialist.

The 20th century

In the last quarter of the 19th century, in countries with developed economies like the USA and the UK, universal education became a legitimate aim of government. Schools were built and, in response to the soldiers returning from the Great War, many of these schools were put to use in the evenings to provide remedial education. The "night school" became a common feature of larger towns, and cities.

The establishment of night schools was accompanied by the establishment of technical colleges (some of which had started out as mechanics institutes). By the time soldiers began

returning from the Second World War, there was a developing system of technical education to help them adapt to work in the civilian world.

Increasingly, the night schools provided leisure-time education and left the preparation for employment to the technical colleges. The concept of "non-vocational" adult education came into being. People went to evening classes to practice a hobby (for example, Pottery), learn a language (Holiday French), or develop an interest (Industrial Archaeology). The term *non-vocational* gave way to the term *non-credit* to acknowledge that people attended adult education courses for all sorts of reasons, including enhancing their employability. Nonetheless, by the 1970s the division between technical and adult education was so great that a technical college and a separate adult education centre might both serve the same city district.

I see both technical and adult education in the humanist camp. The education they provided might have differed, but both were concerned with enabling individuals to enrich themselves, economically, physically, and intellectually. Even competency-based training was essentially humanist since the objective was to help a worker learn a cluster of functions for her or his work. Among these functions were "higher order competencies" such as thinking critically, communicating effectively, and solving problems, all contributing to the worker's growth. Behind workplace education was the ideal of the rational, fully functioning person. The proviso was, of course, that this fully functioning person would work to achieve the organisation's objectives.

As in the previous century, there were opponents who scorned education for enrichment. They wanted education for socialism, and set about providing it. Communist Parties in various countries (Australia, France, Italy and the UK) provided education for their members. The trade unions provided education for their shop stewards. A scatter of labour or people's colleges were established. Antigonish and Highlander happened. Small clusters of like-minded academics gathered in a number of universities (Edinburgh; Groningen; Kwazulu-Natal), and some established recognized research centres (Centre for Popular Education at the University of Technology, Sydney; Labor Education and Research Center at Oregon State University). In Europe and the USA, community development projects were established in depressed urban areas ...

I see all these initiatives as firmly in the socialist camp. They were designed to respond to people defined by their social class, their membership of a trade union or political party, their political beliefs, or their shared oppression. Of course individuals learnt, but the study was done as part of a collective struggle for social change.

Boundaries

In the last quarter of the 20th century the boundaries between the humanist and socialist camps became blurred. Humanist organisations provided socialist education. For example, technical colleges established outreach programs, aimed at meeting the educational needs of communities living in the areas they served. Often these communities were disadvantaged, and sometimes, as a result of the educational program, a group would take political action. And socialist organisations provided humanist education. For example, trade unions, formed to take collective action, began providing tuition in workplace literacy, training in the trades used by their members, and courses designed to help individuals return to the workforce.

While the divisions in practice between humanist and socialist adult education may have become blurred, the divisions in the literature and theory remain distinct. They are manifest in the differences between two conferences: the International Transformative Learning Conference,

and the Popular Education Network conference. The TL conference looks to Jack Mezirow for its inspiration. The PEN conference looks to Paulo Freire.

Jack Mezirow

Jack Mezirow holds a pre-eminent position in the humanist camp. Humanist assumptions inform his writing. For example, each and every person is capable of personal growth, which Mezirow calls "a perspective transformation". A perspective transformation will be an improvement: we will be a better person, and better at being a person. And because no two people will have the same meaning perspectives, a perspective transformation will be an intensely individual experience.

Mezirow has done us three important favours. The first was to break the spell that Carl Rogers had cast over us. Rogers (1969, 1983) recast the teacher as facilitator. We should no longer "instruct", "impart knowledge or skill", or "show, guide, direct", he said, and went on:

> So now with some relief I turn to an activity, a purpose, which really warms me—the facilitation of learning. When I have been able to transform a group—and here I mean all members of the group, myself included—into a community of learners, then the excitement is almost beyond belief. To free curiosity, to permit individuals to go charging off in new directions dictated by their own interests; to unleash the sense of enquiry; to open everything to questioning and exploration; to recognize that everything is in the process of change – here is an experience I can never forget (Rogers, 1983, p. 120).

The careful teacher is replaced by an elated, undiscriminating enthusiast, who gets people "to go charging off in new directions dictated by their own interests". But what if these interests included burglary, with a bit of arson thrown in, or random recreational violence? Unwittingly, Rogers divested the teacher of any moral responsibility for what might happen as a result of her or his intervention.

In articles (1977, 1981) and books (1990, 1991) Mezirow developed his ideas on transformative learning. He drew our attention back to learning, and so to teaching. His 1990 book provides us with example after example of good teachers taking responsibility for the management of learning: showing, guiding and directing.

In his 1981 article, Mezirow made reference to Albert Camus' definition of an intellectual as "a mind that watches itself". This, he said, was an essential activity in adult learning. The reference is significant. Camus talked of "that hopeless encounter between human questioning and the silence of the universe"(2000, p.14). In response to this silence, Camus argued, we must make our own meaning. In response to this silence we must construct our own morality. Mezirow gave the adult educator a role in helping learners do both.

Mezirow did us a second favour by releasing us from the ordinariness of some of Malcolm Knowles' writing and thinking. Knowles broke down the mysterious process of teaching and learning into a series of seriously unmysterious steps. Influenced by Rogers, Knowles concentrated on responding to the needs and interests of the learners. But why only needs and interests? There is a whiff of banality about the concepts: a reasonable amount of protein a day, and stamp collecting (apologies to serious philatelists). Why not start with our demands and desires, our urges and yens, and our loves and loathings?

When Knowles comes to define an educational need he seemingly contradicts his emphasis on the learner. An educational need, he says, is

> … something people ought to learn for their own good, for the good of an organization or for the good of society (1980, p. 88).

This is dour, prescriptive language, and I can almost hear the judge intoning the last phrase as he sends me down for failing to take up facilitation with sufficient zeal.

Knowles sought to construct a theory of andragogy from a number of suppositions about the processes of maturation. They made a useful list but, being suppositions, they were open to challenge. Mezirow, on the other hand, let his theory develop from a major piece of research, which he and his co-researchers conducted in the 1970s, and to which he referred regularly in his writing. Mezirow drew on philosophers, social theorists, and psychologists, and instilled (or re-instilled) an intellectual rigour into adult education discourse. For example, he laid the ground for a serious discussion of andragogy with this single sentence:

> It is only in late adolescence and in adulthood that a person can come to recognize being caught in his/her own history and reliving it (1981, p 11).

Adult learning is about stepping outside our own history. It is about throwing off the cultural yoke. It is about breaking free from the routines that limit our living.c Here is a distinction between child and adult learning that might work. Another supposition, yes, but a confronting one constructed around the evocative images of entrapment and emancipation.

Mezirow's third favour was to introduce new language into the adult education discourse: disorienting dilemma, meaning perspective, perspective transformation … Some of it may have been a new kind of jargon, but he was careful to provide detailed definitions, and his use of the word *domain* was inspired. A domain is a private space, a fiefdom, a realm. Different realms have different forms of government, and different ways of doing things. In the instrumental domain we come to understand the world in terms of cause and effect. In this domain we solve problems through common-sense logic. In the interpretive (or communicative) domain we come to understand the human condition, how we organise ourselves, and how we communicate. In this domain we solve problems through "rational discourse". (I would want to drop that word "rational". By its very nature, discourse will have affective elements, illogicalities and leaps in the dark.) And in the critical (or emancipatory) domain we seek to understand the essence of things, including ourselves. In this domain we solve problems through reflection, and cultural study.

But Mezirow also did us a disfavour, and I am far from the first to say this: he made transformative learning too attractive. He offered us magic. We could privately thrill at the possibility of radical, absolute, irreversible change, as if we might be touched by a sorcerer's wand. And he propped this magic up with subtle (and occasionally impenetrable) theory, so that, in the public domain of the classroom or conference theatre, in the rooms of intellectual respectability, we could come and go, talking of Jurgen Habermas. Mezirow may have been embarrassed by the uncritical enthusiasm with which many took up his ideas, but the horse had bolted.

Transformation is a humanist dream, and a theory constructed upon its possibility has to be a dream too. But, then, dreams—utopian imaginings—provide goals to strive for, criteria against which to measure our progress, and hope.

Paulo Freire

Freire, in his turn, holds a pre-eminent position, this time in the socialist camp. Two of his texts were translated into English (and other languages) in the early 1970s, and quickly taken up by educators using learning as a tool in struggle.

Freire concerned himself with groups, not individuals. He would attribute comments, which must have been made by an individual, to the whole group. So he wrote: "The group participants commented that …" Freire used techniques aimed at shifting his learners from a fatalistic consciousness (What can we do? We are only peasants) to a critical consciousness (We are oppressed. These are the people oppressing us. This is how we will combat their oppression). For the Freiran educator, this process of *conscientization* involves a shift in power. People who were objects of social history become subjects of their own destiny. Another dream perhaps …

Freire's *conscientization* and Mezirow's transformative learning have similarities—Mezirow drew on Freire's work, especially in his 1991 book—but the concepts differ radically in one respect. Transformative learning involves an accusatory kind of introspection. The learner identifies her or his "distorted" assumptions, and then goes through the cathartic experience of owning up to them. In part at least, the blame for previous dysfunctional thinking lies with the learner. *Conscientization* involves a group examining their oppression, defining their enemies, and deciding on action. There is no guilt here. The blame lies with their oppressors.

Wrapping up

Mezirow is pre-eminent in the humanist camp, but holds less sway in the socialist one. In a book reviewing the socialist discourse (Crowther et al, 2005) there is just one reference to Mezirow, and that reference is made by me (OZNewman, 2005)!

Freire is pre-eminent in the socialist discourse, but holds less sway in the humanist one. We have the phenomenon of two remarkable figures, each of whom has had great influence within his particular mob, and limited influence outside it.

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Note: I want to thank my friend Patricia Cranton for commenting on a draft of this paper, and putting me right in a couple of places. I want to thank the 25 Army Majors who spent a class discussing a draft of this article and preparing detailed feedback. I have never had that happen before. And I want to thank Jeff Zacharakis, who commented on a draft of this article, and led the class with those Army Majors. I have, as the saying goes, been blessed.