

# Emancipatory Learning

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**The radical tradition in adult learning is concerned with how learning, knowledge and education can be used to assist individuals and groups to overcome educational disadvantage, combat social exclusion and discrimination, and challenge economic and political inequalities - with a view to securing their own emancipation and promoting progressive social change.**

## **What is Emancipatory Learning?**

**Emancipatory learning** is not concerned with strategies for personal self improvement via an undue emphasis on academic qualifications by way of ladders of individualised opportunity. Its purpose is to develop understanding and knowledge about the nature and root causes of unsatisfactory circumstances in order to develop real strategies to change them.

The kinds of knowledge, pedagogy and educational relationships encouraged by **emancipatory learning** are those which are formed in solidarity with the interests of the least powerful in society. The reason for collaboration is to work with the least powerful to gain more autonomy and independence, more control over their own lives, and to bring about change in the interests of greater equality and social justice.

**Emancipatory learning** is relevant today because of the stark realities of increased material poverty and inequalities - not simply within societies but also between societies in the context of globalization. This includes growing inequalities of income and wealth, massive inequalities in relation to cultural recognition and social diversity, and huge inequalities arising out of access to information. In Britain there is a widening divide between those who are highly educated, skilled and well paid specialists; those who are less skilled but currently employed; and those - about one third of the population - who are poorly educated, poorly qualified, casualised, unwaged and unemployed (Hutton 1995).

In this context, adult educators have a choice - if they do not take the side of the poor and powerless, then, by default, they contribute to preserving the status quo on the side of the rich and privileged. For those who want to contribute to creating a more informed, egalitarian and socially just society, the ideas and practices associated with **emancipatory learning** may be a place to start (Martin 2000).

**Emancipatory learning** is associated - in the literature of adult education - with some other, related ideas: for example, **Really Useful Knowledge, Critical Thinking, Conscientisation, and Transformation**. These are all ideas which come together in the campaign for Popular Education.

## **Really Useful Knowledge**

This idea dates back to the nineteenth century in Britain and to struggles for working class education and the vote (Johnson 1979). It is relevant today in supporting the interests of disadvantaged and oppressed groups and members of progressive social movements - including people with disabilities, women, working class people and ethnic minorities. It is concerned with distinguishing between 'merely useful knowledge' - the kind of knowledge that keeps people in their place and supports the status quo, and 'really useful' knowledge

that enables people to both understand the root causes of the circumstances in which they find themselves in order to make changes.

**Really useful knowledge** is created when individuals and groups begin to reflect upon their experience with each other, in ways that lead to greater insight and understanding, and which enable theories to be developed linked to strategies for bringing about changes.

**Really useful knowledge** assumes that people can learn a lot from their own and other people's experience of common problems and struggles - enough to develop theories and explanations - which can then inform social action for change. The knowledge might be political, emotional or practical. It does not imply learning to put up with unsatisfactory circumstances, it implies getting out from under (Thompson 1997, 2000).

### **Critical Thinking**

**Critical thinking** assumes that people can be involved in 'making things happen' rather than have things happen to them. **Critical thinking** as a basis for learning is the antithesis of rote learning, basic training and behaviour modification - none of which imply the critical engagement of learners in initiating and evaluating ideas. It assumes that all people - whatever their intelligence or ability - must engage in the wider world if they are to survive in it and help to reconstitute it. Information produced by specialists - including government, the media, scientists, educationalists, economists - should not be regarded as the property of specific groups but something which is routinely interpreted and acted upon by all of us in the course of our everyday actions.

**Critical thinking** is the kind of thinking which challenges fatalism, prejudice, apathy and indoctrination. The aim is to engage active citizens in informed participation in social and political life to achieve a more equitable and socially just democracy. **Critical thinking** is not simply concerned with overcoming individual and group 'ignorance' but with encouraging ways of thinking that are critical of the kind of status quo which supports inequalities, injustices and the abuse of power (Mayo 1997).

### **Conscientisation**

This is a term associated with the Brazilian adult educator Paulo Freire and relates to the development of **critical consciousness** as a form of **emancipatory learning**. Freire's approach - first used with literacy students - is based on asking questions about the root causes of social and political problems rather than focusing on the symptoms - in order to plan strategies to address them. According to Freire, oppressed (excluded) people need to develop **critical consciousness** in order to challenge the ideas of dominant groups who are their oppressors. They need to be able to critically assess the kinds of ideas, contexts and relationships which are usually 'taken for granted' or accepted as inevitable, in order to question the root causes of their oppression (Freire 1970).

Through the process of **conscientisation**, or developing **critical consciousness**, excluded groups can learn to identify, interpret, criticise and finally transform the world about them. Crucial to this process is the notion of **praxis** - by which Freire means 'reflection and action upon the world in order to change it'. More simply, it means being able to make the connection between experience, understanding and social action to bring about social change. It is a process which people must do for themselves because liberation or emancipation cannot be handed down from above. It must come from the bottom up.

Through the process of **conscientisation** the poor begin to replace the inevitability of their own oppression by developing autonomy, independence, responsibility and - he says - fuller humanity. In practice this means shedding the kinds of pejorative labels that are regularly attached to minority and excluded groups by dominant groups and which can become internalised - for example, apathetic, lazy, scroungers, irresponsible, unreliable, etc. Instead of going along with the 'conventional wisdoms' prescribed by oppressors and internalising them, minority groups can begin to see themselves in a new light as inherently capable and creative.

Freire is very critical of what he calls '**the banking approach**' to education in which teachers (or trainers) down-load information into learners as if they are empty vessels. This places the learners in essentially passive roles. Banking education leads to the **domestication** of learners by imposing views - however worthwhile - from above in ways that do not lead to their independence or emancipation. The approach promoted by **conscientisation** aims to encourage learners to become actively engaged in identifying problems, asking questions, making analyses and working out strategies for transformation for themselves. The teacher's role is that of an equal **partner** who engages in **dialogue** with learners in the spirit of democratic enquiry and solidarity.

### **Transformation**

**Transformation** is associated with **bottom up** and **people centred** education and development strategies, in which the intention is to make changes to the kinds of social, political, personal and cultural relations in society which are currently based on inequality, exploitation or oppression. In this sense 'the outcomes' of **emancipatory learning for transformation** are expected to include individuals and groups becoming sufficiently aware, well informed and actively involved in 'fighting back' against the circumstances, conditions, ideas and power differences that operate as barriers to equality and social justice.

**Transformation** is likely to be most effective and sustainable when it is pursued in solidarity with others engaged in the same kinds of struggles (Foley 1999).

### **Popular Education**

**Popular education** is concerned with how adult education can contribute to popular struggles for democracy, social justice and equality. A vital component is the commitment to **dialogue** between people as a way of making the kinds of knowledge that can usefully make a difference. Teachers and learners are viewed as equal partners in the learning process, committed to fully democratic relations, in pursuit of an actively democratic wider society.

**Popular education** is not simply populist education. It involves **emancipatory learning** rooted in the real interests and struggles of ordinary people. Popular education is overtly political education which is critical of the status quo and is committed to progressive social and political change. It has nothing to do with 'helping the disadvantaged' or 'the management of poverty', and everything to do with assisting in the struggle for a more democratic, just and egalitarian society (Martin et al 1999).

Like **really useful knowledge**, **critical thinking** and **conscientisation**, **popular education** finds its curriculum in the struggles, the life experiences and the material interests of those who are the least economically, socially, culturally and politically powerful in society. Pedagogy is more likely to be focussed on collective and group learning rather than individualised learning - in order to reflect common struggles, repair damaged solidarities and build new ones. Wherever possible, links are made between education and social action (Crowther, Martin and Shaw 1999).

## **Adult Learning for a Change**

In many ways the language of emancipation, oppression and solidarity may seem a little old fashioned in Tony Blair's New Britain, in which no one talks about social class very much any more, and opportunities are assumed to exist for all those who want to make the most of what is available. For those who are nonetheless 'disadvantaged' or 'socially excluded' - i.e. poor, ill educated, unqualified, unwaged and dependent on benefits - a number of government schemes, linked to education and training, are in place to get people off welfare and into work. Adult and community educators and trainers are likely to find themselves working with poor people in a range of formal and non formal settings. In many cases, those in most urgent need of educational support are the least likely to be involved in formal provision.

It is clear that education - on its own - cannot change societies in which there are economic and class systems which encourage vast discrepancies of wealth and access to resources, including access to information. But education can play a part in assisting people in their various struggles against discrimination, exploitation, inequalities and social injustices, and can make a real difference to peoples lives when heightened awareness gets connected to increased understanding and joint action to bring about changes. Emancipatory learning is particularly relevant in community development and community based learning; workplace learning and trade union education; educational work with women, ethnic minorities, user groups and basic education. However, the view that learning should play a part in sustaining progressive social change - not simply personal self development - means that all kinds of learning can include emancipatory commitments. The challenge facing teachers - in partnership with learners - is how to include the commitment to emancipatory learning and practice across a wide range of subject areas and educational settings (Thompson 2000)

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## **References and Further Reading**

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