

Reflections of an Adult Educator

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One of my final courses in my doctoral program is a seminar on the Political Economy of Adult Education. We were asked to answer a series of questions that were the subject of a conversation between Ian Baptiste and Tom Heaney (1996). As people are sometimes interested in my own philosophy of education, I thought I'd post my reflections on the five Baptiste and Heaney questions, plus a bonus of sorts, reflecting on fundamental principles and precepts for rethinking public education in a ubiquitously connected and pervasively proximate world.

Do I refer to myself as an "adult educator?"

I consider myself an adult educator, but it wasn't always so. As I have reflected on my life, I realize that I have always been a teacher irrespective of the various roles I have played and jobs I have had over a 20-plus-year corporate career, and for the decade thereafter, until I succumbed to the siren song of professional credentialism. My practice has become one of creating specific environments for participants in the enterprise of education in which they acquire some of the necessary tools to achieve new awareness and insight into the world and the meaning they make of it. The key differences between the before and the after may be several, but I will emphasize the one that I consider most informative to my practice.

I had always assumed that education necessarily carried with it a certain instrumentality and emphasis on content. However, inspired by the work – but more importantly, the method – of Marshall McLuhan, I have come to realize that, in his words, “the ‘content’ ... is like the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind” (McLuhan, 1964, p. 18). This inspiration suggests that what I do in performing the role of adult educator has little to do with the subject matter of what I may be teaching, or the specific instrumental use to which the so-called learner may make of it. Rather, the only “training” aspect of my enacting of this role is training “the watchdog of the mind” to create the ability to perceive that which is deliberately or systemically ignored, and to “think things that no one else can think about those things that everyone else already sees” – the attribute of an independent mind according to Schoepenhauer.

What are the distinctive practices, institutions, organizations, purposes and predecessors of the enterprise you call adult education?

Rather than identifying the practices, institutions and purposes of adult education, I would cast my gaze towards those that are characteristically not adult education. In many important respects, vast swaths of this University (of Toronto) – and the institution of university itself – are not involved in the enterprise of adult education. Equally, corporate education, and especially those activities identified as training, are not. These instances, when viewed through a critical lens, almost seem to recall the form of education, or “re-education,” of Mao Tse-Tung’s cultural revolution in China. In these re-education camps, as in many of our own education campuses, what is primarily emphasized is an enforced compliance with dominant normative behaviours, attitudes, thinking, philosophy, and the construction and valuation of specific knowledge and ways of knowing. Irrespective of the particular politics of the institution, faculty, department or program, the business of the academy systemically benefits those who conform and subscribe to particular knowledge paradigms, tending to favour positivist and post-positivist researchers over those who subscribe to constructivist or radical approaches.

It is little surprise, then, that some of the basic tenets of this program (i.e., Adult Education at OISE/UT) inform my opinion on the fundamental precursors of adult education. They are two-fold. First, a constructivist standpoint is needed – the idea that we each, individually and collectively, create meaning in a world that is subjective, contingent, complex and contextualized by an ever-changing ground. Second, all those involved in the enterprise of adult education must not only understand, but more importantly, *value* the notion that there are multiple ways of perceiving, transforming through emotion, and responding to environments, circumstances, subjects and objects. These processes, that can be said to collectively comprise *cognition*, do not represent “an independently existing world, but rather a continual *bringing forth of a world* through the process of living” (Capra, p. 267; emphasis in original).

Give examples of counterfeits of adult education practice.

The most significant and problematic counterfeiting agency of adult education practice is the discourse of lifelong learning. Among the OECD countries, a mandate for Lifelong Learning For All (OECD, 1996) was adopted and endorsed as “an integral part of employment and social policy” (McKenzie & Wurzburg, 1997). This particular orientation not only corrupts the espoused principles of adult education as an endeavour of enlightenment and emancipation – “social education for purposes of social change” (Lindeman in Baptiste and Heaney, p. 3). It also subverts adult educators’ ability to probe and critique societal hegemonic structures, and to instill an ethos of virtuous resistance among those who would be educated. Lifelong learning creates an imperative for instrumentality. But more than that, it introduces a tacit paranoia – fear for one’s livelihood and the ability to even participate in society – that precludes the option of non-compliance.

Even more problematic, yet devilishly subtle, is the language used to describe the endeavour of lifelong learning, and the emphasis on training that it suggests. Trainers speak of transferring skills and knowledge from themselves to the targets of their teaching, suggesting a rivalrous, or competitive, conveyance of material from one to the other. The connotation of transference is that what was once possessed by the giver becomes the exclusive property of the receiver, and that the value of knowledge somehow inheres exclusively in she who possesses it. Of course, such language is completely consistent with the myth of an ever more competitive world, and the idea that knowledge is power, not to mention fame and fortune. The discourse of lifelong learning is thus wrapped up in an imperative to remain competitive and employable by acquiring resources that are not in fact rivalrous, but serve the dominant discourse to be considered as such.

Increasingly “adult learning” is being substituted for “adult education.” What do you make of this substitution?

I have always maintained that education is what remains after you have forgotten everything that you have been taught. Adult learning, when considered relative to this context, shifts the focus from what remains to what is taught. The substitution of “learning” for “education” – and a nuanced and critical understanding of education at that – is a dangerous course for society, because a society is formed of “what remains” – the social values, the moral and ethical sensibilities, and the ability to effect transformation in the face of systemic injustice. I agree with Baptiste and Heaney’s (1996) assessment that learning connotes a political, ethical and moral neutrality that ironically encourages ignorance – literally the learned ability to ignore much that is problematic in favour of that which is instrumental, efficient and economic. With a new emphasis on learning as opposed to education, especially in the context of economic outcomes, maintaining the status quo and the positions of those vested in it is all but assured. Adult learners, that is, those to whom such learning opportunities are made available and who have the means and ability to avail themselves of them, become implicated in supporting the existing hegemonic structure even as they, themselves, become

vested in it. Instrumental and functional learning is important as skills and specific capabilities create a foundation for any civilization or culture. However, all learning must be contextualized by the broader notion of education – that which remains. Eliminating the latter from the discourse negates any potential societal benefits of the former.

It can be reasonably argued that the enterprise you described above will continue, whether or not the label “adult education” remains. Provide a rationale for continued use of the label or propose a more desirable alternative.

I consider the “adult” qualifier in “adult education” as referring not to the targets or objects of the education – those adults who would be educated – but rather to the educator her or himself. The educator as subject can be either an adult or a child, reflecting a spectrum of relative maturity concerning the enterprise of education. The child educator is one who believes exclusively or primarily in instrumentality, that is, the supremacy of content. For the child educator, lifelong learning is predominantly about so-called reskilling or training, creating the image of educator as circus trainer in which the objects of that education – the learners – are taught to sit up and beg on command for the morsels of individual renewal that emanate from the lips of the trainer. Child educators reinforce the hegemony of the particular process that establishes a corporate power hierarchy that, in turn, necessitates credentials and mandates credentialism. But, with all of its trappings of superiority, this educator has not matured beyond the level of the perpetually insecure child, continually seeking external validation, both of those beneath themselves in the learning hierarchy, and those who create the system of validation itself.

On the other hand, the adult educator realizes that it is not the content of the learning, but the sustained effects of the learning that matter. I am not exclusively referring to the effects on the would-be learner, although those effects are obviously implicated in the larger concern of which I speak. I refer instead specifically to the effects on the total societal environment that the learner subsequently can enable after assimilating the true transformative lessons of the education. In this, both adult educator and adult educatee are jointly and unrepealably educated, changing both the immediate environment in which the education occurs, and the larger social environment to which each contributes, and in which each lives.

How do you respond to the apparent outcry for education reform?

When I speak about education reform, I am thinking well beyond mere tinkering with curriculum. Rather, I direct my attention to a serious re-examination of, and conversation about, the foundations and philosophy that underlie contemporary public education systems. Such a reconsideration, of necessity, must contemplate the fundamental changes that are occurring as western society traverses the nexus period between a world shaped by the influences of the printing press and subsequent fragmentary industrialization, and that influenced by the effects of ubiquitous connectivity and pervasive proximity. Here are five principles about which I have been thinking to advance the conversation:

1. People should learn when they’re ready to learn; they should be taught in the places where they will learn most effectively. These places and circumstances are often not a classroom.

This means that:

2. Learning should concentrate on context and process; content is largely irrelevant to education and is therefore quite interchangeable and replaceable. This is another way of saying, “education is what remains after you’ve forgotten everything you’ve been taught.”

Consequently:

3. Intellectual networks replace experts, traditional forms of knowledge authority, and disciplinary boundaries that create subjects.

This, in turn, suggests that:

4. The world is a collaboration, not a competition; Darwin is quite misunderstood and misapplied – it is not survival of the fittest, but survival of the fit, those who can perceive and collaboratively adapt to an ever-changing environment. That distinction between competition and collaboration is important: Since education is political by virtue of its ability to influence perception, sensemaking, and attitude formation, it establishes the foundation of relationships of power that underlie the social fabric of society. Ultimately, we all wear what we sew from that fabric.

All of the preceding four aspects taken together mean that:

5. The goal of education is to learn how to make sense of the complexity of the world as it is lived and experienced, and from that sense-making, to construct a world in which we would all want to live, together.

References

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"I don't want them to believe me, I just want them to think." - Marshall McLuhan
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