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ABSTRACT

The question of how the postmodern would have an impact on the everyday concerns of adult educators can be approached through analysis of three fundamental and persistent concerns evident in the literature of adult education pedagogy. First, the idea of autonomous or self-directed learning is firmly entrenched in contemporary thinking about adult education. Postmodern views of how identity, or the "self," is shaped are appealing because they offer an explanation of how social structures become embedded in individual identity, while pointing to the potential for psychological resistance. Second, the adult education literature has placed a great deal of emphasis on the importance of establishing an appropriate "adult" teacher-learner relationship. Although the humanistic approach to the adult teacher-learner relationship may be criticized for its neutrality, the postmodern approach is open to the charge of indifference in the sense that it is not prepared to privilege any particular position. Third, the importance and centrality of experience as a foundation for adult education practice is widely accepted. The idea of learning from experience certainly contains postmodern tendencies especially if learners are seen as the principal producers of knowledge through immersion in practice. Elements of the postmodern condition are certainly present in adult education pedagogy. What is unclear is whether postmodernism is the best way to describe these ideas and practices. (Contains 17 references.) (YLB)

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The post-Modern condition: reformulating adult education pedagogy.

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I approach this topic from the point of view of the practitioner who, having had some contact with post modern ideas, through the literature or through enthusiastic colleagues, wishes to develop a tentative posture towards post-modernism and how it can inform adult education practice. My first point of departure then is to pose a series of questions: what is post-modernism? Is it a 'condition' which we all experience? Is it experienced by some but not others? Is it an alternative way of viewing the world? Does it have qualities or elements which are unique? In what way does it impact on adult education--Its core goals and values? Its organization and management? Its pedagogical practices?

Beginning with the nature of post modernism, it is clear that any attempt to 'pin it down' so to speak, will be futile. This is a cause for celebration among post-modernists, because one of their canons is that any attempt to define and categories is neither possible nor desirable. Usher and Edwards (1994) express this sentiment:

> There is a sense, anyhow in which it is impossible to fully define the postmodern since the very attempt to do so confers upon it a status and identity which it must necessarily oppose. In other words, any attempt at definition must lead to paradox since it is to totalise, to provide a single unified explanation of that which sets its face against totalization . . . To talk about postmodernity, postmodrnism or the postmodern is not therefore to designate some fixed and systematic 'thing'. Rather it is to use a loose umbrella term under whose broad cover can be encompassed at one and the same time a condition, a set of practices, a cultural discourse, and attitude, and a mode of analysis. (Usher and Edwards, 1994, p. 7)

What then are some of the elements (contested and tentative as they may be) which can be captured under this loose umbrella with its surprisingly broad cover? I will list them below, but without any attempt to categories or any claim to exhaustiveness.

1. The disintegration of monolithic structures and singular all encompassing views of the world or 'grand narratives' (theoretical, ideological, religious, political, bureaucratic).
2. The problematising (and sometimes rejection) of the rational, the stable and the uniform.
3. The celebration of difference and diversity.

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4. The view that knowledge claims are contingent,local and contextual.

5. The rejection of rationality, science and objectivity and the accompanying notions of 'control', 'progress', 'betterment', 'closure' and 'improvement'.

6. A sense of discontinuity, fragmentation and 'borderlessness' (de-differentiation) in institutions.

7. A decentring of the person away from the notion of a coherent 'authentic' self and towards the notion of 'multiple subjectivities', 'multiple lifeworlds' or 'multiple layers' to everyone's identity.

8. The notion that reality is constructed through discourse and practice--which implies a privileging of cultural over economic and political analysis (with the corresponding view that artifice rather than nature is what is to be studied and understood, including artifice in the way knowledge is constructed) .

9. The view that power is not monolithic-there are diverse sources of power, it should be understood as fluid and 'existing as a multiplicity of institutional and psychological forces' (Pietrykowski, 1996, p. 90) .

10. A concern with surface configurations rather than deep structures "The world according to postmodernists is opaque; it is all lived on the surface. There is nothing that hides behind its surface appearances. It is not a case of people saying what they mean--rather they don't mean anything--for there is not any meaning to be had . . . " (Skeggs, 1991, p. 33). This I suspect is associated with the 'playfulness' of postmodernism.

To return to the questions posed at the outset, postmodernism is really a bit of everything--it attempts to describe an historical condition, but its writers are also advocates for this perceived condition--not only is this the way things are, it is also the way things should be. Those of us who cling to outmoded 'modernist' views such as: the striving for an ideal political state, emancipation from systems of power and domination,the pursuit of 'truth' or 'rationality' (or even principles such as those of adult learning), or the individual pursuit of a coherent or 'authentic' identity; are all misguided and morally suspect because we privilege certain views over those of others, don't really acknowledge diversity and difference, and don't really understand how power is exercised through discourse and practice.

Of course the postmodernist view has been contested on a number of grounds: that it leads to nihilism and a politics of despair, that its characteristics are in no way unique, that it underestimates the extent to which people's lives are shaped by economic and political forces, that it exaggerates the ability of individuals to construct their own lives, that the claim about social fragmentation is overstated, and that ultimately it is a view which is politically disabling because it directs people's attention away from collective struggle (Foley, 1993, p. 83). The detractors however do acknowledge the possibility of something worthwhile in postmodern analysis, principally that it highlights 'the complexities and uncertainties of life in the late twentieth century', and how this leads to more subtle and encompassing forms of social control (Foley, 1993, p. 81).

To the question of the impact of postmodernism on adult education--our assessment will very much depend on whether we take the postmodern 'condition' to be given and then trace the extent to which adult education has accommodated to this condition or is symptomatic of it; or whether we trace the impact of postmodern theorising on theorising about adult education; or whether we explore, in a hypothetical way, the kind of adult education implied by a postmodern approach. At least one author (Bagnall, 1994) has adopted the last of these possibilities. Following an analysis of the concepts of 'modern' and 'postmodern' sets out the features of adult education programming which are sensitive to the postmodern. These features, or tendencies, are outlined below:

1. A rejection of centralised planning, systematisation, outcomes--based education, goal based evaluation, or indeed any pre-planning.
2. Uncertainty, indefinability, and unpredictability in the location of authority over and responsibility for educational decisions.
3. An adult education that is spontaneously responsive to and reflective of the non - cognitive, emotive interests, inclinations and preferences of its participants.
4. Participation of learners through both involvement and control of the learning process.
5. Adult education programming away form the conventional, the traditional and the orthodox--more variability but also more ephemeral and particular.
6. An emphasis on the intrinsic value of the learning and learning process rather than its outcome.
7. A view of knowledge and meaning which is constantly open to reinterpretation, deconstruction, and revision. There would be no uncontested or even consensual curriculum or standards which guide, constrain or structure.
8. Adult education would not exist as an entity in its own right, it would be diffused throughout the institutions in society (i.e. de-differentiated).

Bagnall, in line with other critics, paints a gloomy picture of postmodern adult education:

> A strongly postmodern field of adult education practice would, indeed, be wanting in any common perception of the ideal nature of adult education:of the visions sustaining it, the goals towards which it is directed, and the principles constraining and restraining the pursuit of those goals . . . The field may thus be seen as substantially wanting in any common social or political vision, hope, direction or purpose beyond ego satisfaction (Bagnall, 1994, pp. 15-16).

Bagnall focuses mainly on the project of adult education and how it is organized and delivered. But how would the postmodern impact on the everyday concerns of adult educators? I will approach this question through analysing three fundamental and persistent concerns evident in the literature of adult education pedagogy: the notion of autonomy and self direction, the use of experience for learning, and the nature of the teacher-learner relationship.

Autonomy and self direction

The idea of autonomous or self-directed learning is firmly entrenched in contemporary thinking about adult education, and there has been a great deal of scholarly interest in the subject. There are now a variety of meanings attached to the term 'autonomy', particularly the dimensions along which autonomy is exercised. Given the nature of our society and the socialization process, what are the limits of personal autonomy? Is it desirable to point to personal autonomy as an ideal outcome of education and development?

The postmodern view of the self as socially constituted imposes a limit on the capacity for personal autonomy. Usher (1992) quite rightly draws our attention to how adult education supported by the discipline of psychology, constructs the adult learner as an active meaning giving subject, who through self consciousness, is both the source and shaper of its experience.

> The humanistic theorization of subjectivity posits an essential inner core--a true self unique to each individual, which is permanent, coherent and known to the individual. This true self may not always manifest itself fully because of the influence of psychological and social inhibitions which temporarily distort it and impede its full realization. Yet, despite these vicissitudes, the true self is always there and always present to itself. As a rational, unified center it can experience the world, including itself, and construct knowledge about the world and itself.

He is referring here to the 'individualism' which, he claims, pervades thinking in humanistic adult education. The core ideas in the ethic of individualism are described by Lukes (1973). Firstly there is the belief in the supreme value and dignity of the individual. Secondly there is the idea of the individual being independent and autonomous, one's thoughts and actions not being determined by external agencies. Finally there is the idea of self development, with the onus placed on the individual to develop his or her talents to the fullest. This is a fair description of the ethic which has informed much of the adult education literature. But there is a growing opposition to this view, one which, in its extreme form, portrays the individual as merely an expression of distorting ideologies and oppressive social structures. Usher is mindful of this reaction, and warns that it is equally mistaken to adopt an over-socialised and over-determined view of the person:

> critical pedagogy . . . constructs another kind of subject, the exploited subject of 'false consciousness' whose experience is rendered inauthentic by distorting ideology and oppressive social structures . . . As a consequence it tends to deprive subjects of agency by making them social victims. (1992, p. 203)

Thus he describes the two poles of the individual--social dialectic, the psychological/humanistic pole which stresses the agency of the subject, and the sociological pole which stresses how the subject is wholly determined. The dilemma for the adult educator is that neither pole offers a satisfactory perspective on practice, the former seems too naive in failing to acknowledge the power of social forces, and the latter is too pessimistic and leaves no scope for education to have a meaningful role, and there is certainly no role for the autonomous learner. Usher offers a way out of this dilemma, he urges us to embrace a post-modern perspective, and through it, a new engagement with the humanistic tradition. By a post-modern perspective Usher means a focussing on laguage, text and discourse as the means through which we analyse and understand our experiences and thereby construct ourselves.

> We can only be the agents of our experience by engaging in a hermeneutic dialogue with the confused and often contradictory text of our experience of the world and of ourselves. The dialogue is one where formation in intersubjectivity and language, location in discourses and practical involvement in the world is a condition for the achievement of autonomy rather than a barrier to its discovery

> language, for example, does not merely constrain subjectivity but offers the possibility for constructing a critical self and social awareness through which subjectivity can be changed. (1992, p. 210)

Thus it is not the true or authentic self which is discovered through reflection on experience, instead experience is viewed as a text which can be re-interpreted and re-assessed. In effect we learn to read the text into which our self has been inscribed, and we discover that there are alternative readings and therefore an alternative self to be constructed. This doesn't mean we can ascribe any meaning to our experiences or that we can create any self we choose. We need to give a plausible reading to our experience, one which can legitimately contest, say, dominant meanings. Also the self remains situated in history and culture and continually open to re-inscription and re-formulation. The autonomous self is thus neither an end state or something which stands outside history and culture. The autonomous self recognises its situatedness and the limits and possibilities of re-interpretation and re-formation.

Although individuals cannot transcend or eradicate their historical and cultural situatedness (and neither should they, necessarily), there is nevertheless room to manoeuvre in the continuing interplay of self and others--and it is in this space that autonomy resides. From the perspective of one who is interested in the development of identity across the lifespan, as I am, postmodern views of how identity, or the `self', is shaped are quite appealing because they offer an explanation of how social struters become embedded in individual identity, while at the same time pointing to the potential for psychological resistence.

Adult teacher learner relationship

The adult education literature has placed a great deal of emphasis on the importance of establishing an appropriate 'adult' teacher-learner relationship. Because teachers and learners are adult peers there is a widely held view that the relationship between teachers and adult learners should be participative and democratic and characterised by openness, mutual respect and equality. To be sure a relationship like this is desirable in all levels of education, but the political and social position of children presents a constraint which is not apparent in the adult context. Adults who are learners in one context (or moment) may become teachers in another (in postmodern terms there is de-differentiation). In many instances teachers of adults are the subordinates of their learners in the larger organisational or professional context. This role flexibility, and even ambiguity, in adult teaching and learning, is not a feature of school based education. An ideal 'adult' teacher-learner relationship is not something which emerges naturally from an adult teaching and learning situation. Issues of dominance, dependency and control are as urgent in adult education as they are in school based education.

What is the ideal 'adult' teacher-learner relationship? As a first step in approaching this question it is useful to analyse how power should be distributed between the teacher and the learners and among learners. Who should determine when, where, how and what will be learned? What special status, and privileges, if any, should be accorded the teacher? Whose interests are served by a particular kind of teacher-learner relationship? What are the control and facilitative functions of the teacher? There is thus a tension between the power of the teacher and the power of the learners.

Freire's writings typify a primary concern with the politics of the teacher -learner relationship. In 'liberating' or 'problem-posing education, he writes, "the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the one who teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow" (1972, p. 53). Interestingly enough similar sentiments were expressed earlier this century by one of the founding fathers of liberal adult education, Mansbridge, who, in a publication in a 1910 publication entitled 'University Tutorial classes', maintained that the teacher of adults should be in real fact a fellow student, and the fellow students are teachers (Alfred, 1987).

These views are contrasted with their opposite, with what Freire refers to as the 'banking' concept of education which mirrors oppressive society as a whole. Raul Anorve, a community educator who works with Mexican groups in Southern California, summarises Freire's distinction between the 'banking' approach and the 'problem-posing' approach (1988-Literacy for empowerment: a resource handbook for community based educators). In the banking approach:

1. the teacher determines the goals
2. the teacher is knowledgeable and the students are ignorant
3. the teacher imparts knowledge and skill and the students receive it
4. the teacher talks and the students listen
5. the students store the knowledge and skills for future use
6. the teacher directs the class sessions and the students comply
7. the education process perpetuates the status quo

By contrast, in the problem-posing approach:

1. the learners determine the goals
2. the facilitator and learners all have useful knowledge and skills
3. the learners soon apply the knowledge and skills in the pursuit of their goals
4. the facilitator and learners discuss issues
5. the facilitator and learners jointly decide the direction of class sessions
6. the education process helps create new realities

Freire developed his ideas in the context of educating illiterate peasants in Brazil in the 1960s. Anorve uses a Freirian in his work with Mexican migrants in the 1990s. They both have in common the desire to release the potential of education as a means by which domination and oppression can be thwarted. Myles Horton, working independently in the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee advocated a similar approach in his work with labour unions in the 1930's and 1940s and in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s:

We realised it was necessary to learn how to learn from these people, so we started with the practical, with the things that were, and we moved from there to test our theories and our ways of thinking . . . we learned we had to take what people perceive their problems to be, not what we perceive their problems to be. We had to learn how to find out about the people, and then take that and put it into a program. (Horton, 1990, p. 140)

At Highlander everyone sits around in a circle, which symbolises equality among all participants. Over the years more and more rocking chairs were introduced, so that now all chairs in the circle are rocking chairs, which seems to add to the poignancy of the learning circle idea. Horton too was concerned with education, and follow-up action, as a means or fostering a more democratic society, and so naturally he was concerned with distributing power among the learners. This should not be taken to mean that the teacher is neutral, far from it "We also claimed no neutrality in presenting facts and ideas. What we sought was to set people's thinking apparatus in motion, while at the same time trying to teach and practice brotherhood and democracy" (1990, p. 152).

It is clear that power should be distributed evenly in community education, especially where there are strong common bonds and collective desire to act to bring about social justice. A community educator like Myles Horton did in fact exercise strong leadership and was very purposeful in pursuing his agenda. Thus although there are strong postmodernist tendencies in the approaches of Freire and Horton, in the sense that the processes used are open ended, uncertain, or may surprise or thwart the expectations of the educator as alternative readings of situations are explored; ultimately, as Pietrykowski observes, they privilege 'readings and renderings which have as their goal the emancipation or liberation of the oppressed' (1996, p. 89). While the humanistic approach to the adult teacher-learner relationship may be criticised for its neutrality, the postmodern approach is open to the charge of indifference in the sense that it is not prepared to `privilege' any particular position.

Learning from experience

The importance and centrality of experience as a foundation for adult education practice is widely accepted. Community adult educators such as Myles Horton believe very strongly in using lived (rather than created) experience as the primary source for learning. This seems to be a general feature of education which has as its goal social justice and/or personal transformation. But it is increasingly becoming a feature of continuing professional education as well (which may also include personal transformation within its scope) and it is increasingly being incorporated into higher education. Kolb (1984), for example, points to some trends in higher education which have prompted the idea that the experiences of learners should be acknowledged. Firstly, there are a growing number of non-traditional students in higher education for whom formal academic approaches are inappropriate. They have, it is argued, a more 'street wise' practical approach to learning, and experiential methods allow them to capitalise on their practical experience. Secondly, the advent of the mature-age student in higher education has resulted in a scrutiny of ideas and knowledge in terms of accumulated life experiences and not solely in terms of conceptual clarity, internal consistency, fit with experimental observation, and other academic criteria. Thirdly, the movement towards vocationalism in higher education has been accompanied by a demand for stronger links between education and work and experiential learning methods help to address this demand. Finally there is pressure for higher education institutions to develop strategies for assessing prior work and life experiences for the purpose of granting academic credit or certification.

This approach to learning from experience can be stated quite simply. The first task is get people to talk about their experiences. The second task is to analyse those experiences individually or collectively. The third task is to identify and act on the implications of what is revealed. This basic framework has spawned a number of approaches which are now well documented.

Brookfield (1991, p. 177), for example, regards critical reflection as the key to learning from experience. This entails three phases:

1. The identification of the assumptions that underlie thoughts and actions.
2. The scrutiny of the accuracy and validity of these assumptions in terms of how they connect to experience.
3. The reconstituting of these assumptions to make them more inclusive and integrative.

It is the recognition and analysis of assumptions which is the key to critical reflection. In the critical incident approach ". . . learners are asked to produce richly detailed accounts of specific events and then move to a collaborative, inductive analysis of general elements embedded in these particular description" (1991, p. 181). Brookfield describes three examples of critical incident exercises he has devised. They all follow the same pattern: the participants are asked to describe a concrete event that has triggered an emotional response--they are guided in describing this event (when, where, who was involved? etc). Then follows further guidance on how to proceed, which is standardised for all three exercises:

> Now, find two other participants to form a group of three. In this triad, each person will take a turn reading aloud his or her description. After you have read out your description, your two colleagues will try to identify the assumptions about good educational practice that they think are embedded in your description. You, in turn, will do the same for each of your colleagues. To help you identify assumptions, it might be helpful to think of them as the rules of thumb that underlie and inform our actions. In this exercise, they are the general beliefs, commonsense ideas, or intuitions that you and your colleagues hold about teaching.
> Your analysis of assumptions should initially be on two levels: (1) What assumptions do you think inform your colleagues' choices of significant incidents--what do their choices say about their value systems? (2) What assumptions underlie the specific actions they took in the incidents described?
> After your description has been analysed by your two colleagues, you have the opportunity to comment on what you see as the accuracy and validity of their insights. Do you think they have gauged accurately the assumptions you hold? Were you surprised by their analyses? Or did the assumptions they identify confirm how you see your own practice? They, in turn, will have the chance to comment on the accuracy and validity of your assessments of their assumptions.
>
> It is also interesting to look for commonalities and differences in the assumptions

> you each identify. If there are commonly held assumptions, do they represent what passes for conventional wisdom in your field of practice? If there are major differences, to what extent might these signify divergent views in the field at large? Or might the differences be the result of contextual variations? (1991, pp. 182-183)

This exercise concludes with a group analysis of assumptions. The general features of the exercise are that:

1. The focus is on the learners' experiences (those which are emotionally significant)
2. Learners work from the specific to the general
3. There is an emphasis on peer learning
4. Assumptions that comprise conventional wisdom are analysed
5. There is a de-briefing of the form and focus of the exercise

It is useful to compare and contrast these general features with the principles identified by Hart (1991) in her companion article on 'Liberation through consciousness raising':

1. Acknowledge the existence of power and oppression
2. Use personal experience as the original source to be critically reflected upon
3. The group should have a commonality of experience and assumptions
4. There should be equality among all participants in the group
5. There is a need to gain and sustain a theoretical distance

Although her purpose is more clearly targeted towards women as an oppressed group (an she warns against applying such principles without regard to context), there are some commonalities with Brookfield in the principles she espouses. Firstly they both regard personal experience as the source of learning, secondly, they are both commened with unmasking power relations and how they operate (this is implicit in Brookfield's requirement to analyse the assumptions of conventional wisdom), thirdly, they are both concerned with moving beyond the specific experiences of individual participants to the construction of more general concepts, ideas or theories which link these experiences within and beyond the group (i.e. Hart's 'theoretical distance'), finally they have in common peer reflection and critique and an implied or explicit equality among those peers.

Perhaps the most significant feature of the above approaches (and others like them) is that there is a clear requirement to move beyond the exploration of personal meaning. Thus the attribution of meaning to experience cannot simply be a personal, unique and private enterprise conducted without reference to existing bodies of knowledge or the experiences of others. This point, of course, was well made by Dewey (1963) in his discussion of the relation between objective and subjective knowledge. For him knowledge is the product of an interaction between the experiencing subject and the external objective world. Reference has previously been made to Usher's view that the self, or one's 'subjectivity', is the product of social forces and is thus not fixed, rational and always present to itself:

> ". . . Meanings, and therefore the meaning of experience, is not guaranteed by subjectivity because the latter is itself constituted in language. This implies that although experience belongs to us as individual subjects, we are not the authors of the meaning of our experience" (1989, p. 29).

The approaches to critical reflection described above acknowledge that we are not the sole 'authors' of the meaning of our experience. On the other hand, although the meanings one attributes to experience are influenced by language, history and culture, they are not wholly determined, or, more to the point, they are not permanently fixed. Language, history and culture can themselves become the object of critical enquiry. This is precisely the strategy adopted by those adult educators who, first and foremost, aim to challenge the meanings attributed to experiences among the groups with which they work.

The idea of learning from experience certainly contains postmodern tendencies especially if learners are seen as the principal producers of knowledge through immersion in practice. If this were the case then knowledge would indeed be local and particular rather than global and universal. Also the postmodern educator is also very much like the facilitator of critical reflection: "the role (of the intellectual) shifts from one of confident educator, who possesses confidence in his(sic) judgement of taste and the need to mould society in terms of it, to that of the commentator, who represents and decodes the minutiae of cultural objects and traditions without judging them or hierarchizing them" (Featherstone, 1991, cited in Usher and Edwards, 1994, p. 199). Thus there is a shift away from the learners,who individually or communally reflect on their experences, to the teacher as commentator or decoder. But the crucial phrase is 'without judging them', and without that condition, the postmodern tendency evaporates.

Concluding comment

Elements of the postmodern condition are certainly present in adult education pedagogy; the decentring of the teacher, learners reflecting on and deconstructing their experiences, the exploration of alternative readings of experience, the contested nature of knowledge, greater learner control of the processes and aims of learning, the breakdown of the leacher-learner dichotomy, more open-ended curricula and pedagogical practices, the recognition of the power of discourse to shape people's lives, the recognition of diversity among students, and the acknowledgment that knowledge is generated through experiences at work, in the family and in community life. It is also evident that the boundaries between the sectors of education are breaking down; particularly between formal and non -formal education and between education delivered at different sites and locations. There is no doubt that what constitutes knowledge is being contested and reframed by our educational institutions. What is unclear is whether postmodenism is the best way to describe these ideas and practices, especially given that educational values and goals, social and political visions, frameworks of belief, hopes, directions and communal and individual aspirations continue to motivate actions, not simply play or the satisfaction of desire.

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