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**Crisis in Adult Learning and Education in the United States—And a Postscript of  
Hope<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

We in the U.S. live at the edge of radical possibilities, but few seem to actually see openings available for profound change, or perhaps have become simply too paralyzed to act. After all, the U.S. government in the post 9-11 world has placed “national security” above “liberty” and taken unprecedented measures to monitor citizens’ activities—including warrantless (without court approved) surveillance. We are surrounded by the seemingly immovable forces of a panopticon (Foucault’s notion of an instrument of discipline), of colonization of our lifeworlds, of systemic injustice, of crushing

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inequalities, of hyper consumerism and commercialization, of greed, power and violence against people, animals and the Planet. This paper contemplates, who are raising voices of resistance, of righteous indignation and just rage, and of revolutionary change at this time? Who dares to confront the political and the powerful, and when they do, what are the consequences? “Where is the soul and conscience of adult education and learning today?” It looks at three scenarios, (1) Addiction to—or indifference toward—violence, (2) the upward redistribution of wealth, and (3) the linkage of eco-catastrophe with hyper-capitalism. It argues that the State and formal adult education are inadequate to the task of creating a better world—a goal of adult education. But all is not lost. Pockets of youth and some adult educators in the U.S. are unfettering their dreams and unchaining their behaviors, explore social movement learning, probing the ways that dominant discourses are displaced in informal and nonformal venues by emancipatory ones; they are opening escape hatches into education for uncompromising social transformation.

### **Living the questions**

We in the U.S. live at the edge of radical possibilities, but few seem to actually see the openings available for profound change, or perhaps have become simply too paralyzed to act. After all, the U.S. government in the post 9-11 world has placed “national security” above “liberty” and taken unprecedented measures to monitor citizens’ activities—including warrantless (without court approved) surveillance.<sup>1</sup> It is estimated that 500,000 citizens may be on the U.S. government observation list. Has a miasma settled over us that has produced quiescence, or worse, hopelessness?

We are surrounded by the seemingly immovable forces of a panopticon (Foucault's notion of an instrument of discipline), of colonization of our lifeworlds, of systemic injustice, of crushing inequalities, of hyper consumerism and commercialization, of greed, power and violence against people, animals and the Planet. I contemplate, who are raising voices of resistance, of rage, of revolutionary change at this time? Who dares to confront the political and the powerful, and when they do, what are the consequences? I don't want this essay to be a litany of the evils of our times, but a few examples may help my argument to be more robust. Given the reality of the U.S. lifeworld, if "the job of adult educators is to help learners look critically at their beliefs and behaviors not only as these appear at the moment but in the context of their history *and the consequences of learners' lives* (italics added)" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 197), I ponder, 'Where is the soul and conscience of our field today?'"

### **Addiction to—or indifference toward—violence**

As I pen these notes, a city in Connecticut is burying 20 beautiful children (and more than a half dozen heroic teachers<sup>ii</sup>) as a result of the systemic violence that stalks our communities<sup>iii</sup>—a result of a culture of aggression and the fetishization of guns.<sup>iv</sup> The U.S. has the highest gun ownership rate in the world - an average of 88 per 100 people. In the U.S., each year there are typically 30,000 U.S. deaths due to firearms. Statistics from 2007 suggest that every day about 266 people in the U.S. were shot; every day, 82 (one third of them) died. A Pew Foundation study has shown that one in every 31 adults, or 7.3 million people in the U.S., are in prison, on parole or probation; one in 11 African-Americans (9.2 percent) are under correctional control; one in 27 Latinos (3.7 percent);

and one in 45 white people (2.2 percent).<sup>v</sup> Our solution to violence is simply incarceration. The U.S. has the highest reported imprisonment rate in the world.<sup>vi</sup>

I can't help but speculate on the role that the U.S. military industrial complex plays in numbing our senses to violence. Senseless carnage spills from U.S. streets to alley-ways in places like Gaza and neighborhoods in Afghanistan where we kill noncombatants (violence "softened" by the term, "collateral damage"—the death of innocent people incidental to the intended target) in the "war on terror" and the "war on drugs." Both "wars" provide pretexts for immoral behaviors in the government-industry-private sector cabal of weapons manufacture, purchase, distribution and immense profiteering. We support other nation-states' comparable behavior as well. Who can forget the recent media images of Jihad Misharawi, a BBC journalist living in Gaza, carrying the limp body of his 11-month old son, Omar, through al-Shifa hospital in Gaza City?<sup>vii</sup> during several days a ferocious Israeli assault that felled citizens of Gaza (as well a Hamas militants). The behavior met a tepid U.S. response when President Obama asked Israel to "make every effort to avoid civilian casualties." We are all complicit in the death of Omar, however, the incident passed without an utterance from the communities of adult educators, as far as I know. Why can not most of us see Omar's blood on our hands as we wrap Holiday presents, decorate our homes, bake cookies, and when at the computer keyboard, put finishing touches to an erudite paper or a presentation to deliver before a learned society?

**The rich get fatter—the lower and middle class grow more lean**

As I type this essay, U.S. political “leaders” are in combat over which social class will have their taxes raised (the “haves” or the “have nots”) and which social programs will simultaneously be eliminated before a January 2013 deadline. Income inequalities in the U.S. are now at levels not seen since the Great Depression, driven by an enormous redistribution of wealth upward from the poor and middle class to the most wealthy, fueled in part by politicians (from both parties) who give “the market” and the wealthy more liberties and freedoms (and fewer restraints) than are offered to average citizens, producing a “fatter rich and a leaner middle” class.<sup>viii</sup> Recently U.S. officials walked away from leveling criminal charges against Europe’s biggest bank—a financial institution that allegedly allowed itself to be used to launder *billions* of dollars on behalf of drug cartels and organizations named on the U.S. terrorist list—saying that the bank was too big to prosecute.<sup>ix</sup> Washington’s elected officials, lobbyists and Wall Street elites are orchestrating changes that are transferring wealth from the 99% to the 1%.<sup>x</sup> In Washington, DC, the head of the hydra, the ratio of income of the top 5% to the bottom 20% is 54:1! It seems odd that ordinary folks are held accountable to the “rule of law” while “big money” and the privileged are given exemptions to it. Often in the U.S., “the law” simply shrugs—indifferent to criminal deeds of those “connected” to the system—unless you are poor, a documented or undocumented immigrant, a person of color, or one counted among the “less useful.”

### **Linking environmental bankruptcy to unrestrained capitalism**

I was recently asked to write a piece for the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education’s journal, *Adult Learning* on “Green Jobs.” I could not touch upon

the topic without addressing Climate Change. In fact, as I write this note, it's nearly the beginning of winter and on the table beside my computer is a bouquet of roses from my garden, and today a hummingbird—typically a migrant to Central or South America in winter—came foraging among the flowers that would, in a usual year be spent, but which splash bright red and yellow colors in the garden this afternoon. The daffodils are poking their heads above the soil as though it was March, not December. I suspect “winter” will arrive eventually, but in so doing, it will add a record number of warm days this year to those of recent past “winters.”

The more prosaic response to environmental adult education posits that “conservation and environmental enhancement can occur simultaneously with economic development. Recent environmental discourse in the U.S. is about creating jobs through energy efficiency and investments in behaviors that improve the environment while concurrently generating revenue” (Hill, in press). The problem is, as Chris Williams (2012) has clearly shown, adult education’s role in the U.S. has been for middle and upper-middle class people; folks who can afford organic vegetables, free-ranging chickens, and beef raised on the open prairie (at tax payers expense) without feeder-lot chemistry. He tells us bluntly, “The majority of solutions on offer, from driving a hybrid, to recycling plastic, to using efficient light bulbs, focus on individual lifestyle choices of mostly privileged people. Yet the scale of the crisis requires a far deeper and fundamental transformation (audio).” I argue that technologic and market solutions to environmental problems are not bad, but that unrestrained free-market actors are driving a steak into the hearts of these potentially helpful solutions. In the end, systems,



based on unlimited profit, plundering the Earth's resources, speculation, greed, and toxic assets, [are] the root of our ecological and economic crises—and must be the focus of deep green adult education efforts....Current economic, political, and social systems are not ecologically sustainable. Capitalism's ultimate goal is the generation of wealth at the hands of the few by the hands of the many. Its axis mundi is the Board Room (and State House) where schemes play out to maximize profit. (Hill, in press)

### **Where is the soul of the field of adult education in the U.S.?**

Adult education programs in the U.S. are typically shrinking at best and disappearing at worst. Between these extremes, some programs finesse a dance that produces system players in a neoliberal market economy. Faculty, wring their hands, ask how to define adult education in meaningful ways—a perennial activity from our founding. What is typically not heard is the question, “Do we dare perturb the educational industrial complex rather than participate in our indoctrination as “good” corporate/system players at our universities’ hands?” Given the reality of the U.S. lifeworld, fleetingly described above, if “the job of adult educators is to help learners look critically at their beliefs and behaviors not only as these appear at the moment but in the context of their history *and the consequences of learners’ lives* (italics added)” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 197), where is the soul and conscience of our field today?

### **Glimmers of hope**

In the three (of many possible) scenarios portrayed above (violence, upward redistribution of wealth, and the linkage of eco-catastrophe with hyper-capitalism), the majority of *formal* adult educators in the U.S. would have to employ microscopes to find our soul. Perhaps a statement on the more *formal* aspects of adult education in the U.S. is illustrated in a study of the 2008 *U.S. National Report on the Development and State of the Art of Adult Learning and Education* (ALE) prepared by the U.S. Commission for UNESCO and the U.S. Department of Education as a preparatory document for CONFINTEA VI, the 6<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Adult Education. The analysis of this formal *National Report* focuses on three arenas: the Participatory Process employed to gather data for the *U.S. National Report*, the report's Content, and the Education Policies underpinning it. Sadly and despite guidance by UNESCO to engage a full conversation on the state of adult learning and education, the U.S. National Commission neglected the participatory process. As Hill et al. (2008) wrote,

Instead of employing participatory mechanisms to build consensus and to craft a comprehensive policy document, the *U.S. National Report* borrowed from three existing reports previously prepared by and for national agencies....The subject matter of the *U.S. National Report* is fully inadequate. Adult education, a bright and vibrant field in the United States, is reduced to two sub-fields, adult basic education and English language acquisition for non-native speakers.

In the end it is an economic, neoliberal document designed to remediate perceived deficient low-wage workers. Other human values are displaced in favor of an ideology of workforce education.

But all is not unpromising. Pockets of youth and adult educators in the U.S. are unfettering their dreams and unchaining their behaviors. By applying Foley's (1999) admonition to explore social movement learning, probing the ways that dominant discourses are displaced in informal and nonformal venues by emancipatory ones, they are opening escape hatches into education for uncompromising social transformation.

Hill (2010) reminds us that social movements and popular education (e.g., Native American and indigenous rights, peace and nonviolence education, the feminist movements, the environmental movement, the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and Queer movements, the movements for disability rights, the civil rights movement, etc.), are vibrant sites for adult learning and education. Social movement activities, historically an arena for adult education are key elements in influencing the national mood, and ultimately opening policy opportunities. "Professional" adult education (that which is academic and formal) has also played a role, but to a far lesser degree. Perhaps adult educators in formal arenas of the U.S. have been more "background" players because much of the work needs to be situated in a scholar-practitioner approach; traditional adult education has focused heavily on the theoretical, and has been (and continues to be) open to participants who are generally middle and upper-middle class learners.<sup>xi</sup> Anecdotally it seems that the role of lifeworld *experiences* in U.S. adult education training is outside of

the doctoral research paradigm that may place the learner in real world contexts (with the exception of perhaps their dissertation project) where hands get dirty, hearts lifted up and hearts broken, and most importantly, systems challenged through direct action in solidarity with the subjects of study.

Experience is known to be of paramount importance in learning since the time of the professionalization of the field. For example, Rogers (1961) argued,

Experience is, for me, the highest authority. The touchstone of validity is my own experience. No other person's ideas, and none of my own ideas, are as authoritative as my experience. It is to experience that I must return again and again, to discover a closer approximation to truth as it is in the process of becoming in me. (p. 23)

Lindeman (1926) paralleled this sentiment saying, “The resource of highest value in adult education is the learner's experience” (pp. 6-7).

In fact, some have argued, “Learning cannot be designed. Ultimately, it belongs to the realm of experience and practice. It follows the negotiation of meaning; it moves on its own terms. It slips through the cracks; it creates its own cracks. Learning happens, design or no design” (Wenger, 1998, p. 225). “True learning can only take place when people are given the opportunity to construct knowledge for themselves, on their own terms, so that they can act to change their worlds” (O’Loughlin, 1992, p. 337). The Jesuit scholar Teilhard de Chardin stated it succinctly, “The whole of life lies in the verb ‘seeing.’” (*Zen*

*paths to change*, 2000) and I argue that the only way to see the world is *to be in the world* experiencing it in all of its manifestations—both the ones we desire and the ones we eschew.

Activism might be the quintessential way that this philosophy is operationalized and is a key component to experiencing the world. When we do not take up “activism as the practice of adult education” (Hill, 2011) we miss a prime opportunity to be agents of change. While this appears to be diluted or lost in the academy, it has been parlayed into successful behaviors in nonformal and informal learning settings. A few examples might illustrate this point and shed light, and hope, on adult learning and education in the U.S. today.

### **Peace and non-violence education?**

Hill (2007), in a chapter on “breaking open our times” suggests resurrecting the questions that Phyllis Cunningham raised in 1991 on the role of adult educators in promoting peace education. He inquires,

Leavening our times means engaging in education toward a culture of peace.

Peace adult education recognizes that if we want peace, we must work for justice.

It requires asking such questions as why the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE) has a Commission on Military Education and Training, but none for Peace Education? Why, in the U.S., are there several state-funded War Colleges but not a single government-operated Peace College. Once

when I raised this question in class, a former military student respond that peace courses *are* taught at War Colleges. I wondered out loud, “Would the world be in a better place if the situation was the other way: war was a course at Peace Colleges, rather than peace a course at War Colleges?” Peace and justice learning involve being challenged to think critically and to broadly explore issues of fundamental contemporary significance, including those related to conflicts and injustice in and by the U.S. (p. xx)

Catholic Worker Movement as a site of adult learning. This movement has 201 houses of hospitality in the U.S. and 23 internationally<sup>xii</sup> today, operates communal farms, and engages in active protest (including civil disobedience with arrests). Additionally, many of the “Worker Houses” in the U.S. have “clarification of thought” nights as a form of adult education on peace and social justice, and the movement produces a newsletter, *The Catholic Worker*, first published in 1933 (Parrish, 2002) that is continuous today, still selling for “one penny.” Some Worker Houses produce their own newsletters and websites. The numbers of people whom they reach cannot be accurately measured but must be in the thousands.

School of the Americas Watch (SOA). Each year, around the third week of November, thousands of people gather in my state, Georgia, at the military base, Ft. Benning, for “teach-ins,” dialog, discussion, debate, and nonviolent civil disobedience against the U.S. death machine housed at Ft. Benning.<sup>xiii</sup> November 2012 was no exception when “from November 16-18, over two thousand students, prison abolitionists, teachers, nuns,

immigrants, musicians, farmers, activists and workers from across the Americas mobilized to the gates of Fort Benning, to once more express...humanity and solidarity against the school of death.”<sup>xiv</sup> Key activities during this period include workshops, discussions, collaborative learning and critical reflection—as well as civil disobedience.

Occupy Wall Street. Typical of a growing experience of new new social movements, is the “leaderless” character of educating and activating people for social change. Perhaps the quintessential example is the movement, Occupy Wall Street. The people-powered movement began on September 17, 2011 in Liberty Square in New York’s (Manhattan) Financial District. It has modified the slogan of the World Social Forum (“Another World is Possible”) to, “Another City is Possible”—and has grown globally as a powerful educational, advocacy, and activist adventure battling the “corrosive power of major banks and multinational corporations over the democratic process, and the role of Wall Street in creating an economic collapse that has caused the greatest recession in generations.”<sup>xv</sup> The loosely organized movement’s mission is to be, “a resistance movement with people of many colors, genders and political persuasions. The one thing we all have in common is that *We Are The 99%* that will no longer tolerate the greed and corruption of the 1%.”<sup>xvi</sup> Their motto is, “the only solution is **WorldRevolution**.”<sup>xvii</sup> As with new new social movements, information and communication technologies are its heartbeat. Adult learning takes place through more tactics performed *simultaneously* than possibly any other means today—formal, informal or nonformal. They include: live video streaming of events, blogs, listservs and other social network activities, websites, flash mobbing, public gatherings, presentations, art-based methods of teaching and learning,

including street theater, poetry slams, parades, posters and can be summed up as an archetypal form of cultural jamming (in the *Aesthetics of Cultural Politics* it is also referred to as “guerrilla semiotics” and “night discourse”<sup>xviii</sup>). The works of Sandlin, Schultz, & Burdick (2010); Sandlin (2008<sup>xix</sup>), Sandlin and Milam (2008), and others have brought cultural jamming, this highly contemporary and valuable form of adult learning and education, into the lexicon of our field. And the new new social movement is a phenomenon largely overlooked by U.S. adult educators. It has been

labeled the “convergence movement,” which is sustained by convergence activism, direct action, and civil disobedience (Shepard & Hayduk, 2002). This new new social movement has been called the “movement of movements” or the “new new left” by Naomi Kline (Straus, 2000)...It is based on multiple-issues of social justice, and has been prompted by such factors as globalization, the shifting boundaries between public and private space, the growing income disparity, a nascent U.S. Empire, the emergence of new identities, resistance to invisibility, and new technologies. It is about dignity and the refusal to accept humiliation, oppression, exploitation, dehumanization. (Hill, 2005)

The new new social movement, despite its absence on the academic radar screen, is spawning hundreds of self-actualized nonformal learning groups and events in the U.S., in both rural and urban settings, including eco-resistance; ethical treatment of animals; resistance to genetically modified organisms in the human food chain; labor education (on topics as diverse as raising the minimum pay [4.5 million people in the U.S. make at or below the minimum wage] to health care and the casualization of the work force



leading to few or no worker-benefits); the social determinants of health care; immigration reform; racial profiling; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and Queer rights; stockholder activism (demands for corporations to divest stock holdings that oppress people or destroy the environment); neighborhood safety; affordable housing; universal access to health care; voter registration; and so many more.

## **Summary**

In this essay I have tried to make it clear that neither the U.S. government nor academia will engage the kind of meaningful youth and adult learning and education that the complex, violence-prone, greed-inspired social context demands—but “a million lights” burn in the advocacy and activism found in informal and especially nonformal venues.

While the U.S. government and the academy have the potential to add to the interventions and solutions needed, it remains up to those working at the grassroots in radical revolutionary ways to be the primary agents carrying us forward to a better world. We are present and active in the U.S. in numbers too plentiful to list here. The bigger question is whether the forces working against the fundamental restructuring and dismantling of oppressive systems will be successful in suppressing our forward motion—in silencing our rising voices. Only we adult learners and educators can answer this question.

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<sup>i</sup> See: [http://www.judicialwatch.org/blog/2012/12/unprecedented-govt-surveillance-of-u-s-citizens/?utm\\_source=twitterfeed&utm\\_medium=twitter](http://www.judicialwatch.org/blog/2012/12/unprecedented-govt-surveillance-of-u-s-citizens/?utm_source=twitterfeed&utm_medium=twitter) It was reported in December 2012, that, “the Obama Justice Department has secretly granted the government broad new powers to gather and keep personal information about ordinary U.S. citizens not suspected of any crimes.... There need not be any suspicion that the person presents any sort of danger or has committed any crimes. The idea is to study for “suspicious patterns of behavior.” It is estimated that the list has over 500,000 names.

<sup>ii</sup> See: <http://nytimes.newspaperdirect.com/epaper/viewer.aspx>

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<sup>iii</sup> See: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2012/12/14/nine-facts-about-guns-and-mass-shootings-in-the-united-states/> . In the past 3 decades, there have been at least 61 mass murders using firearms in the U.S.—about 2 per year.

<sup>iv</sup> See: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bob-cesca/debunking-the-gun-culture\\_b\\_2332088.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bob-cesca/debunking-the-gun-culture_b_2332088.html) An astounding 30,000+ people are killed by guns each year in the U.S.

<sup>v</sup> See:

[http://www.pewstates.org/uploadedFiles/PCS\\_Assets/2009/PSPP\\_1in31\\_report\\_FINAL\\_WEB\\_3-26-09.pdf](http://www.pewstates.org/uploadedFiles/PCS_Assets/2009/PSPP_1in31_report_FINAL_WEB_3-26-09.pdf)

<sup>vi</sup> See: <http://www.webcitation.org/5xRCN8YmR>

<sup>vii</sup> See: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2012/11/15/the-story-behind-the-photo-journalists-11-month-old-son-killed-in-gaza-strikes/>

<sup>viii</sup> See: <http://www.reuters.com/subjects/income-inequality/washington> Examples include: Inequality has increased in 49 of 50 states since 1989. In all 50 states; the richest 20 percent of households made far greater income gains than any other quintile; etc.

<sup>ix</sup> See: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2012/dec/14/hsbc-money-laundering-fine-management>

<sup>x</sup> See: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2011/nov/16/occupy-protests-data-video> The phrase 99% vs 1% is a metaphor developed by the “Occupy Wall Street” movement to highlight the disparity between the “poor” (99%) and the “rich” (1%) in the U.S. today.

<sup>xi</sup> For example, the online for profit University of Phoenix lists the approximate cost of a masters degree in adult education at nearly \$20,000

(<http://onlineschools.edudemic.com/l/793/University-of-Phoenix>); the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) suggests that on average the cost of a bachelors

degree is between \$15,000 - \$40,000 ([http://www.cael.org/pdfs/a\\_consumer-s\\_guide\\_to\\_going\\_to\\_school\\_-\\_cael](http://www.cael.org/pdfs/a_consumer-s_guide_to_going_to_school_-_cael)); graduateschools.com lists the fee for a masters degree in adult education at Pennsylvania State University at about \$24,000

([http://www.gradschools.com/program-details/pennsylvania-state-university-world-campus/m-ed-in-adult-education-212192\\_2](http://www.gradschools.com/program-details/pennsylvania-state-university-world-campus/m-ed-in-adult-education-212192_2)).

<sup>xii</sup> See: <http://www.catholicworker.org/communities/commlistall.cfm>

<sup>xiii</sup> See: <http://www.soaw.org/about-the-soawhinsec/what-is-the-soawhinsec> “The School of the Americas (SOA) is a combat training school for Latin American soldiers, located at Fort Benning, Georgia. In 2001 renamed the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC). Since 1946, the SOA has trained over 64,000 Latin American soldiers in counterinsurgency techniques, sniper training, commando and psychological warfare, military intelligence and interrogation tactics. These graduates have consistently used their skills to wage a war against their own people. Among those targeted by SOA graduates are educators, union organizers, religious workers, student leaders, and others who work for the rights of the poor. Hundreds of thousands of Latin Americans have been tortured, raped, assassinated, “disappeared,” massacred, and forced into refugee by those trained at the School of Assassins.”

<sup>xiv</sup> See: <http://www.soaw.org> Photos are available at <http://circlevision.org/archive/2012/2012soaw/2012index.html> and <http://www.flickr.com/photos/steveandluella/sets/72157632139981862/>

<sup>xv</sup> See: <http://occupywallst.org/about/>

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<sup>xvi</sup> See: <http://occupywallst.org>

<sup>xvii</sup> See: [http://occupywallst.org/article/September\\_Revolution/](http://occupywallst.org/article/September_Revolution/)

<sup>xviii</sup> See: Gavin Grindon's book by that title, published by Cambridge Scholars Publication, Oct 1, 2008.

<sup>xix</sup> Sandlin edited an entire issue of the journal *Convergence*, 41(1) in 2008 on why consumerism matters to adult education and learning.