

ADULT EDUCATION AND THE IMPORT OF CRITICAL THINKING IN A GLOBAL ERA OF ACCELERATED TECHNOLOGY

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ABSTRACT: In the 21st century, globalization has ruled the drive behind adult education. While adult education, throughout much of the world, historically has its roots in addressing social inequities and social justice, globalization has caused a shift into more economic driven approaches in years of late. Through experience and observation in the field of adult education there is a constant drive to provide stackable credentials and quick pathways to employment. It is important that adult education find balance with the demands of today's world and the foundation upon which it was built. An exploration of terms and approaches related to and relevant to adult education and critical thinking provide a springboard for its continued role in today's world. Adult education has a duty to continue to incorporate criticality and social awareness as a foundational function of its work. This can be done through a myriad of approaches that apply to the many various adult education settings. This work has great import to today's world and our future.

Keywords: globalization, adult education, social justice, technology, critical thinking

Throughout history, in many areas of the world, adult education's roots have been embedded in social justice and equality. In many places, its existence, through various avenues of engagement, came to be as a means of empowering those that were oppressed by providing them with knowledge and skills needed to advocate for change. In the 21st century our formal education systems, experiencing external driving forces from the economy and employability skills, have experienced a shift resulting in adult education losing focus this building block of adult education. In today's world, and especially in light of globalization, is it still the responsibility of higher education to endeavor to enlighten students on issues of social justice? If it is still relevant, what impact does it have on today's world and our future?

First, a very brief presentation of adult education history, with additional reference specific to American Education history provides a base for our understanding for previous and current approaches. This is followed by a literature review that explores some of the different terms and perspectives that relate to adult education and social justice, different fields of thinking, and different methods of engaging students in critical activities. After this exploration, a formulation of why it is the responsibility of higher education to engage in activities related to social justice and equality and the impact and importance for today's world.

Adult Education History

Adult education is often associated with Western Europe and the working class. In its founding, Mejai Avoseh (2009) explains that adult education was "located in issues

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related to empowerment” (p. 125). Adult education was used at this time to enlighten the working class to the political and social corruptions of the time and provide them with the knowledge and critical skills needed to respond and advocate for change. At its base, the “larger history of adult education has been associated with a diversity of social movements with the common aim of helping the beneficiaries of adult education overcome challenges of all forms especially those couched in forms of inequity and lack of access to opportunities” (Avoseh, 2009, p. 125). The first adult education opportunities were geared towards assisting learners with skills that would enable them to fight for a better situation.

The history of adult education in America have varying viewpoints as depicted through well-known adult education historians, such as Malcolm Knowles, Harold Stublefield, and Patrick Keane. A vast majority of the history of the American Adult Education system incorporates contributions that are fairly homogenous in representation of individuals and delivery methods. One such description is offered by Michael Welton (2010) in which he states that “adult education in Canada and the U.S has been (and still is) White, male, and middle class in sensibility” (p. 85). While each of the historians mentioned have both intersecting and opposing constructions of the American Adult Education system, there is exists throughout their historical depictions a continuous call for knowledge and thinking. Additionally, when the entire landscape of American Adult Education is considered, to incorporate alternative forms such as “lyceum lectures, correspondence schools, agricultural programs, and university extensions”, the same foundation of critical thinking and education as a form of social justice become more apparent (Welton, 2010, p. 85).

Literature Review

In order to accomplish a clear perspective on adult education and its responsibility to incorporate critical thinking and critical consciousness, one must ensure that understanding of terms used are the same for all. This is established through terms offered and clarified in multiple works. Additionally, a number of approaches exist regarding adult education and critical thinking related to social justice. Each of these provide knowledge and information as a base for personal perspective. It is through the exploration and summary of these works that a critical perspective is derived regarding adult education’s responsibility to engage students in critical consciousness.

Critical

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary the definition of critical is expressing or involving an analysis of the merits and faults of a work of literature, music, or art. In relation to adult education, there are additional dimensions that need to be incorporated. In Susan Cipolle’s *Service-Learning and Social Justice* (2010) the definition of critical incorporates the perspective that “individuals must examine power relations inherent in the situation or context; question the underlying assumptions on race, gender, and class; and understand it’s connection to the dominant ideology” (p. 4). This added dimension challenges educators to assist learners with viewing their world at a deeper level. This

deepened view calls on the learner not to just accept what is, but to look at why and how. Critical consciousness, or conscientization, as termed by Paulo Freire, “refers to learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (Freire, 2004, p. 34). Students begin to view the world around them from an enlightened perspective by examining the underlying reasons a certain reality exists. It is in this awareness and awakening that adult education found its first roots.

Empowerment

In terms of education, it is often argued that education empowers students to live better lives. From the critical perspective, “empowerment means understanding the causes of injustice and taking action to create more equitable conditions, not only individually but especially in concert with others” (Prins & Drayton, 2010, p. 210). This definition allows the learner to look past their own individual needs and look at advocating for change for oneself or a broader collective. It is empowerment, as defined by the critical perspective that opens the door for social transformation. From a critical perspective, Inglis’ (as cited by Prins & Drayton, 2010) further explains that “adult education for empowerment aims to help ‘individuals attain greater economic, political, and social power’ within the existing system, whereas adult education for emancipation seeks to transform social systems, particularly through collective action and social movements.” Empowerment is something that exists within the current systems and can move towards change, emancipation is freedom from the old and entrance into something truly new.

Globalization

The defining theme for 21st century adult education is globalization. Glastra, Hake, and Schedler, (as referenced by Merriam, 2010, p. 401), define globalization as the “new sense of growing extensiveness of social networks involved, the intensity and speed of flows and interconnections within these networks, and the reach of its impact.” It is through globalization that we have seen much of adult education’s shift away from addressing social justice and movement into economic drive and motivation. The increased speed of communication and desired outcomes has caused a focus to be driven more by economic goals. Relative to globalization is multiculturalism, which James Bank, as referenced by Cipolle (2010), defines “an idea that there should be educational equity for all students; educational reform to ensure that all students have an equal chance for success; and a process of striving for the goals of equality and eliminating discrimination” (p. 5). Multiculturalism is an approach that seeks to balance all that is inequitable in the classroom. This includes seeking approaches that don’t favor privileged students or using non-traditional teaching methods that balance the majority students against minority students. Through these terms and definitions, one establishes a unified understanding of the topic at hand.

Approaches

A number of models, theories, and perspectives exist regarding adult education and its role relating to social justice and inequality. The focus for current purposes is on approaches in the classroom and not necessarily on the general theories leading to the approaches. While an understanding of social, emotional, and behavioral theories related to these approaches deepen our wells of knowledge, we will limit our exploration here to just the broader sweeps of important adult education work.

Critical Service Learning

One such way is through *critical service-learning* which connects students not just to their community and meeting the needs of their community but helping them to make connections to changing their community. Susan Cipolle (2010) explains that critical services learning takes service-learning and adds activism as another dimension (p.4). It is in this frame that students engage in social justice and change. Cipolle posits that “the path to social change begins with developing a critical consciousness. In general, this means having an accurate view of reality. The four elements of critical consciousness development are developing a deeper awareness of self, developing a deeper awareness and broader perspective of others, developing a deeper awareness and broader perspective of social issues, and seeing one’s potential to make change” (Cipolle, 2010, p. 7). Students expand their views through various stages of personal growth and develop critical consciousness that leads to social action.

Critical educators are those that endeavor to engage students in action through personal and social awareness. However, understanding the difference and the relationship between praxis and phronesis is important. Cipolle (2010) explains that “critical educators often discuss the importance of praxis, which is critical reflection and action with the goal of social change for equity and justice” (p. 7). Praxis is to be a guiding force behind education and learning. Peter McLaren (as cited by Cipolle, 2010) “adds another dimension by arguing that praxis (informed actions) can be guided by phronesis (the disposition to act truly and rightly. Actions and knowledge must be directed at eliminating pain, oppression, and inequality, and at promoting justice and freedom”. Critical educators aim for students to look critically at the world and then choose to act based on those new views. However, it is important for those actions to be motivated by improving a situation.

Freire’s conscientization, as quoted by Avoseh (2009), is “an analysis of literacy and learning as method of human liberation... a process of growing and developing in awareness” (p. 128). conscientization is grounded in providing students that ability to critically think about their reality and the reality of others. It provides a humanizing perspective by recognizing that there isn’t a singular reality. Avoseh further clarifies that this approach puts a “human face on and intellectual power into adult education as a way of empowering adult learners to interpret the realities of globalization” (p. 129). Adult education needs to have humanistic approach that encourages students to employ critical thinking and be active seekers of truth, knowledge, and justice.

Global learning

Global learning is another approach widely covered in literature. With globalization being the major theme for the 21st century, its pervasive effects in all aspects of adult education, to include approaches, was inevitable. Hovland, as referenced by Anderson (2008):

Identifies two components that describe global learning: (1) successful preparation of students to live responsible, productive, and creative lives in a dramatically changing world, and (2) shaping students' identities as they are shaped by such factors as power and privilege, within both a multicultural U.S. democracy and an interconnected and unequal world. (p. 171)

We live in a rapidly changing world and students should have the critical skills and awareness needed to handle the shifting landscape. Adult learners require the skills necessary to critically assess their current world and future environments. Anderson (2008) states that "faculty are charged with building students' capacities to form their own evaluations about complex and controversial issues and questions" (p. 33). Educators are not meant to serve as moral beacons that impart their knowledge and perspectives on their students. It is the role of the adult educator to engage students in learning opportunities that assist them with seeing the world through a broader lens. It is through this lens that students may grow their own capacity to see and respond to inequities and inequalities.

Different Perspectives

Not all literature reviewed held the connection of adult education and social justice in a positive regard. David Bromwich's *Politics by Other Means* (1992) cites political and economic agendas as the driving force behind all efforts of education. His perspective is that because of the polarizing definitions for terms, like culture, that no formalized education will be able to provide an unbiased "awakening" for any learner. His example of polarizing terms for culture involve "the great confusion between culture as social identity and culture as a tacit knowledge acquired by choice and affinity" (Bromwich, 1992, p. xiv). In having such polarized definitions of terms, Bromwich believes that implementing approaches free of influence is impossible. According to Bromwich, by current standards, all approaches in education to develop critical thinking are tainted by the political right and the academic left, both of which have overlapping agendas steeped in power conservation and maintenance of the status quo.

Higher Education Responsibility

Adult education should work to assist "students with exhibiting a parallel appreciation for intellectual diversity—new knowledge, different perspectives, competing ideas, and alternative claims of truth, and they must pursue truth and wisdom by following the intellectual methods that will lead them to valid conclusions." (Anderson, 2008, p. 33). Research regarding higher education's responsibility is shallow and rife with opposing perspectives. Focus and research dedicated to spanning the bridge between adult education's formation and its current role in today's society and context would be of

great benefit to guide approaches. When considering the current landscape of adult education, Noel Merino (2010) notes that:

In the last few decades the call for character education has seen a resurgence, from both religious and secular groups. Some claim that the decline in character education over the years has led to an increase in crime and other social problems. Others see character education as intimately connected with the goals of education in general. (p. 9).

This unraveling of adult education from critical thinking and character education in the early twentieth century has been viewed by many as the cause of the current troubles of the world. One of the main goals of education is to better the learner, either individually, economically, or socially. As Merino mentions, many consider this to be fundamentally connected to character education, which is a form of critical thinking.

In light of the perspective that adult education has an obligation to be a vehicle for social change and justice, educators should seek to enlighten students in a purist manner that is not tainted by outside or individual influence. This can be done by providing a bevy of information and perspectives, not just those meant to influence their viewpoint and conclusion. In understanding the complexities and multiple theoretical perspectives of empowerment, education can work to thwart perpetuation of societal inequities. Vital to this concept is the inclusion of the community it seeks to empower. They need to be involved in determining desired outcomes and goals. The outside determination of changes sought further embeds bureaucratic structures one seeks to change. True empowerment education exists when it is “of, by, and for the community” (Prins & Drayton, 2010, p. 215). Inclusion is of great import to the enactment of social justice.

Education is meant to be a vehicle for change and that change should not limit the individual to their own desires and outcomes but expand their lens to see society and community changes needed as well. We live in a diverse world and learners should be enabled with the capacity to see multiple views and perspectives. It is important to remember that “the larger discussion about diversity should never be so fragmented that we lose its essential relationship to educational responsibility, academic quality, and the promotion of the greater good” (Anderson, 2008, p. 33). In a global world, adult education should incorporate multiple approaches and perspectives that cast a wide net over learners. This requires a movement away from strictly traditional approaches and extending into alternate ways of learning and growing together.

The Impact and Importance for Today’s World and Our Future

Education is a vehicle for individual and sometimes societal change. The resurgence of character education, while necessary, is a very complex undertaking. Gurudev (2018) addresses our current education system as one that “has been churning out self-centered individuals who have no time for the well-being of the society they live in” (p. 1). It is vital that we provide opportunity for students to become empowered not just as individuals but as champions for society and our future. Without critical empowerment,

we become a society of self-centered individuals who are unable to see past our small realm of influence and desires. As Prins & Drayton (2010) point out “adult education has a rich history of using education as a tool for individual and collective action, especially in struggles for social justice” (p. 217). Education is the only vehicle, whether formal or informal, to transformation and change.

Anderson (2008) urges us not to engage in:

the notion of ‘dumbing down’ that can apply when students are not given the tools to expand their knowledge base, engage new and different perspectives, accept the changing nature of the world, and understand that intellectual diversity and globalism equalize the value of shared experiences (p. 167).

As educators, we need to be vigilant in the learning opportunities we provide to students. We should not be short-sighted or impose unintended influence on student’s learning experience. John Meyer (1977) posits that “education is seen as an allocating institution—operating under societal rules which allow the schools to directly confer success and failure in society quite apart from any socializing effects” (p. 56). We need to be aware of our potential reinforcement of current societal standards and provide environments that are rich in social inclusion and criticality.

In our daily life it is sometimes hard to understand that what we think, say, and do are products of what we have experienced and have implications on our environment and those around us going forward. Without an understanding of our personal motivations and their impact on ourselves and others, we are like a ship without a destination apt to go whichever way the wind, the waves, and the currents take us. Recently, I went out with a group of women to celebrate a dear friend’s 40th birthday. At the end of the night when loading up in a local cab to go home, another local cab owner came out and made a scene about our use of this cab company over his company. In his ranting he used very derogatory language about our cab driver, to include inappropriate references to his race. This caused an uproar from our group in response and led to a lot of discussion on the way home amongst ourselves about change and action against this sort of event. We’ve all had poignant moments in life that shaped who we were from then forward. The moments we will never forget because of the veil that may have been lifted and the impression that point in time made on our lives. These are defining moments in which we choose who we are and how we respond and interact with the world. Sometimes we fight and sometimes we go quietly along, but either way we are transformed and may or may not transform others in that instant as well.

Adult educators are obligated to arm learners with the critical thinking skills needs to recognize and act on the inequities in our society. Education systems exist to provide opportunity for growth and knowledge, for individual and community benefit. When we encounter situations in society in which we are part of or witness such egregious acts, we have to be armed with not only the ability to respond to the immediate situation but the ability to recognize the larger issue that needs to be addressed and acted upon. True change is only accomplished through a paradigm shift initiated by the response and action of many.

As the world has expanded through globalization, so has our exposures to societal inequities. Adult and higher education should endeavor to provide learners with critical consciousness to spur action against social inequities and towards societal change. The classes I remember the most in my undergraduate college experience are the ones that challenged me, that challenged my frame of reference and experience, the ones I grew from. My favorite class was the shortest one I ever had during the summer semester of my junior year, bioethics. We covered so many topics and it was then for the first time I moved out of my “reality” and began to look at a multi-dimensional world with multiple perspectives. This opportunity for growth must continue to be a critical component of adult education. Without it, we become shallow vessels driven by the winds and the undercurrents we can’t see and have no means to steer against.

Conclusion

Education is a means to understanding all of the factors that influence who we are and also to understanding the broader impact our choices and actions can have on the world around us. We need to first garner an understanding of the roots of adult education and the terms and vocabulary associated with critical thinking and conscientization. Various processes and approaches are presented as means for incorporating critical thinking in adult education. Ultimately, adult education should continue to maintain its roots in addressing social inequities and social justice. This can be carried out through multiple approaches and models leading to greatest impact under a wide-range of settings. Critical thinking, as a foundational focus for adult education, is of great import to our world today and our future. It must not be lost, buried, or diminished in the economic drive spurred by globalization but recognized as ever more important because of globalization.

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