Turning Theory on Ourselves: Some Resources and Constraints for Adult Educators

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Abstract

This article argues that as adult educators we should not be outside the remit of our own theorising. It begins with an earlier effort to construct an ethical grammar to audit the probity of working to change others through adult education. This is situated in terms of contemporary debates about the possibility of truth and certainty in understanding and changing the world. Maintaining the vision of adult education as a transformative force in society while respecting the integrity of our students as co-participants in this process is identified as a pivotal challenge. Constraints on engaging with this challenge are analysed and further resources for turning theory on ourselves are suggested.

Introduction

Sometime around the mid-1980s, I began to ask questions about the nature of my engagement with adult learners. At that stage, I had been teaching sociology and social philosophy since 1970, initially on the University College, Galway and later the University College, Cork (UCC) extra-mural diploma programmes. I enjoyed it like no other kind of teaching, before or since, in a career that has encompassed primary, post-primary and university levels. The centres were dispersed throughout Connaught and Munster. Arriving at night in often remote locations to meet adults who had committed themselves to three-hour sessions, twice-weekly in settings not always most appropriate to or comfortable for adult learning, encouraged a gratifying sense of missionary zeal. Student response was predominantly positive and learners spoke of benefiting in diverse and often surprising ways. To me, the sessions appeared informal and collegial an environment in which ideas were processed and experiences were shared and analysed. So, what was the problem?

I found it difficult to articulate the nature of my discomfiture. Certain questions prodded me. A central theme of the UCC sociology course was *debunking*, helping students to question the taken-for-granted perceptions and beliefs by which they interpreted their world and lived their lives. Yet, I as the teacher, could remain above this and largely control the agenda for the process – the targets for debunking and the conceptual, thematic and ideological resources to be used. No one queried my authority to invade their private world of belief and practice in this fashion. In what I read about adult learning encounters at that time and heard at conferences, teachers in such settings were encouraged to see themselves as learners also. But it was I who mediated the new ideas and regulated and monitored class discourse. No one asked if and how I had changed. I sat no end-of-year examination. While, as sociologists, we prided ourselves on taking the side of the underdog and on giving credibility to the perspective of the disadvantaged, it was the sociologists themselves who often regulated the diagnosis of people's problems and directed the prescriptions for change.

Looking at the practices of other adult educators, I could identify specific change ideologies, including a fading Catholic social reconstructionism, the 'option for the poor', social and community activism, modernisation, liberalism, feminism, egalitarianism, etc., all sitting alongside the new terminology of facilitation, collaboration, leadership, participatory learning, etc. and confirmed with ritualistic piety in the reorganisation in semi-circle form of the desks in the local vocational school. Despite efforts on my part to acknowledge the adult status of my students, in the selection of content, collegiality at the interpersonal level, recognising and using their personal expertise, prior learning and experience and deploying my own life events as resources, an unease with the apparent relentless pervasiveness of the power disparity between them and me continued to prevail.

In grappling with these dilemmas, I tried to construct an ethical grammar to help me calibrate the probity of my role as a teacher of adults. As I saw it, the challenge was how to maintain a transformative role for adult education while respecting the integrity of our students as co-participants in this process. This resulted in the publication of *Commitment, Educative Action and Adults* (1993). There, I attempted to address a number of core issues that need to be confronted by those who, like myself, would seek to change other adults through education:

- How do people come to be committed to seeking to change others through educational programmes? Are teachers of adults themselves constrained within particular ideological positions and resistant to self-reflection and change? Do they ever change through interaction with their students?
- What is the visibility and epistemic status of the programme's objectives? How clear are students about the manner in which the programme seeks to change them, particularly in relation to the extent and nature of its invasiveness in terms of their beliefs and orientations?
- How is the legitimacy of the programme established? Does it rely on tradition, rationality or the personality/charisma of the providing body/teacher to justify its objectives and practices?
- What is the nature of the social engagement between the participants, including the teacher? For instance, do power disparities or relationships of dependency distort the students' control over the manner in which they experience change?
- How are dysfunctional responses on the part of participants interpreted and responded to? Are students who do not change in line with the programme's intentions considered to be resistant and fearful of change, in error and unredeemed (and therefore, perhaps, in even greater need of intervention than had been intitially assumed)? Or, is there an effort to achieve a dialogue based on difference and recognition and with what level of success?

In this, I drew on a number of obvious resources that included, Hogan and Habermas on communicating a programme's intentions; Weber and Lukes on power and legitimacy; Hirst, Habermas and Phenix on the forms and functions of knowledge; Brim, Berger and Luckmann, Freire and Giroux on personal change; Mezirow, Goffman and Garfinkel on the social context of personal change; and Wittgenstein, Bourdieu, Foucault, Derrida and Baudrillard on language, discourse and power. I list these authors by way of commending their interdisciplinary range in pursuing such issues since they implicate all levels of the social order – individual, social, structural and cultural.

This exercise helps explain the title of this article. I was trying to turn theory on myself and my adult education practices and engagements, and hoping that others would share my concern that as adult educators we ourselves should not be outside the remit of our own theorising. This article seeks to further explore this contention by way of identifying constraints as well as supplying additional theoretical and conceptual resources for its elaboration.

In the event, a key limitation of *Commitment, Educative Action and Adults* was its failure to draw out the macro-theoretical implications of some of the sources I had employed. This would have helped me to more precisely name and frame the dilemmas and issues that I sought to address as those that characterise the intersection of modernity, with all its assumptions about reason, truth and progress, and post-modern, post-structuralist scepticism about naming, knowing, contesting and perfecting the world. In retrospect, I was seeking, contra Lorde's (1984) injunction, to critique a system while relying on its immanent resources.

Inglis's article 'Empowerment and Emancipation' (1997) is more successful in this regard and is surprisingly underused in Irish adult education discourse. In addressing the nature of power in debate and practice relating to empowerment and emancipation, he acknowledges that adult educators committed to emancipatory learning may have "become caught up in the contradictions of the postmodern era":

> On the one hand, they are constrained by Foucauldian pessimism which binds their discourse and the search for truth into an endlessly evolving politics of power in which they implement discipline and order. On the other hand, adult educators can be enthused by Habermasian optimism, namely that power and its colonizing effects on the lifeworld can be overcome; that it is possible to reach a just, free and equal society through rational communication.
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> (Inglis, 1997, p.15)

Inglis does not attempt to resolve this contradiction and argues that we understand our lives between these two extremes. Emancipation, he feels, may well involve a continual juggling between the two. The central theme of his article is that the involvement in this process of those who were selected for emancipation from oppression must be facilitated by providing them with an accessible, theoretical framework which would enable them to see how power is implicated not only in their personal, social and political condition but also in their engagements with educational institutions, learning programmes and teachers. It is not clear to me from a reading of the article if Inglis would agree that naming a programme as emancipatory shouldn't entitle it to then be exempt from this scrutiny.

Naming the macro nature of this dilemma as seeking to 'juggle' modernity and postmodernity is a generative resource for reflexivity among adult educators.

But this interface needs to be conceptually populated and a language of analysis created if we are to be able to talk to one another or oneself about how we experience these tensions in our practice. Acknowledging its ontological depth (differentiated in terms of its 'parts' and their respective influence) is suggestive of the diverse domains or layers of the self and the social order implicated in our practice, all interacting but each with emergent qualities. I came to appreciate the value of this when, as a feature of the study of cultural politics, I began to theorise the concept of paradigm and found myself obliged to excavate the building blocks of meaning making in society and within ourselves in a more schematic fashion than I had previously attempted. I draw on this later in the context of extending the use of Habermas's public sphere as a model for adult education engagements.

Redemption

A structural constraint to turning theory on ourselves as adult educators lies in the dominance of redemption as a constitutive force in Irish adult education. I have sought to outline this in some detail in the context of the construction of adult education as a field of knowledge and practice from the 1960s in *Cultural Politics and Irish Education since the 1950s. Policy Paradigms and Power* (2005). Relevant here is the understanding of adult education as something to be used to compensate, remediate or upgrade, that is to be seen in the manner in which, since the 1970s, the interventionism of special needs learning has come to dominate and provide some sense of a unifying rationale in an otherwise fragmented conceptualisation of adult learning. Fleming (1996, p.49) recognised this transition in his criticism of the absence of a philosophy of adult education in the 1995 Education White Paper:

> Without this vision of what adult learning really involves, adult education becomes a sort of remedy for what was missed the first time on the educational merry-go-round. The implication of the White Paper is that anything that is not remedial is a luxury and non-essential. There has to be an acceptance that lifelong learning is not just a catch-up on lost or missed opportunities and not only justifiable as good for getting a job.

Linked to this is the fact that from the 1980s what theorisation of adult education has occurred has been substantially conducted by intellectuals representing specific social movements such as those of feminism, anti-poverty and social inclusion. Whereas earlier those who occupied the role of intellectual were con-

cerned to advance and expand adult education provision, since the 1980s they have been drawn from those within adult education who valorise particular kinds of adult learning over others as mechanisms for the advance of specific kinds of social change, and from those of other substantive and academic backgrounds who are attracted to it because of its ideological potential. There are few intellectuals who address adult education as an object of study in its own right, apart from its potential for advancing the objectives of social movements, or because of the scholarly issues that it raises.

Despite differences in their substantive objectives, Irish adult education programmes can be largely characterised by an ideological orientation to redemption. This is exemplified by the assumption on the part of providers/advocates that they know what adults need and how they ought to change so as to be repositioned according to some vision of their essentialised and rightful relationship to society. It is very explicit in literacy, second-chance and community education programmes but, on inspection, it is also true of continuing education and earlier varieties of adult education.

Two quotations, three decades apart, characterise this redemptive ideology:

> A recurring observation in many of the submissions was 'to get the people to appreciate the need for and value of adult education'. Unless the need is felt, the effort will not be made. We would accept as a priority, appreciation programmes in adult education itself, i.e. programmes designed to excite people to want what they need.
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> (Interim Murphy Report, 1970, p.13)

> This question (what is needed for women to move beyond personal development) would have addressed the issue much better, if it had asked what is needed to politicise personal development education for women and prevent it becoming an exercise focused solely on personal symptoms, spirituality and individual healing? My immediate answer to this question… is that we need feminist/politicised facilitators who are able to incorporate social analysis, radical politics and feminism into course content which is also capable of meeting the felt and expressed needs of many women for a focus on their personal and domestic lives.
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> (Ryan, 1999, p.16)

These quotations serve to reveal some of the distinctive features of redemption in adult education discourse. There is a vanguardism (the assumption of knowledge, obligation and duty) in identifying targets for redemption and in specifying their needs. It is non-reflexive in relation to what constitutes redemption. The agency of its recipients is acknowledged only in conformity, and the refusal of redemption is explained in terms of misrecognition or structural resistance.

Table 1 outlines some of the forms which redemption has taken in Irish adult education discourse. The first two varieties of redemptive discourse have existed since the 1970s. Firstly, there is the objective of providing for personal improvement through role education. Its rationale is to develop more knowledgeable, happier, fulfilled individuals who would contribute to a better society by their greater efficiency, consideration and sensitivity in the enactment of their social roles, be they civic, social, occupational or personal. This reflects a broad satisfaction with the structure of society and seems to assume that whatever improvements are required are capable of being effected by better role performance by individuals, rather than by changes in role definitions or in the relationships between roles. Even with new work demands and arrangements, the assumption remains that the individual's self-fulfilment and society's needs are essentially complementary and compatible. Secondly, there is the aspiration to foster individual adjustment to social and technological change. The intention is to help people to cope with the phenomenon of change, particularly with periods of accelerated technological change and with temporary phases of unemployment by forming adjustable, mobile and trainable people. In this context change is seen to be inevitable and, once the individual makes the necessary adjustments, to be benign, and to represent progress. Contemporary versions, stress the need to establish or maintain competitive advantage in international trading and attractiveness to investment, and social cohesion and community integration and responsiveness. Active reflection is not expected and the main requirement from people is that they rise to the challenge of change and modify and adjust to reap the potential benefits for all.

Table 1: Features of Redemption in Irish Adult Education Discourse (from O'Sullivan, 2005, p.528)

	Role Education	Adaptability to Change	Empowerment	Emancipation
Varieties	Enabling people to enact their social roles in a more functional manner	Coping with, and adapting to, social and technological change	Putting people in control of their lives	Designated social and political transformation
Manifestations	Parenting, citizenship, family, occupational learning, etc. Later: Time/ Stress management, and work/ home balance programmes	Upgrading and re-skilling for workers; training for new work practices; adaptation to social change Later: training for national competitiveness	Social and personal development programmes; some adult education programmes for social change; some applications of Freire's and Mezirow's theories	Anti-colonial, Catholic social reconstructionist, feminist and egalitarian programmes
Vanguardism	Functionally conservative Later: Liberal functionalist/ Human Resource Management	Regulated modernisers, guardians of tradition Later: technical/ competitive rationalities	Assumption of skill and knowledge in critical analysis	Ideologically initiated and possessors of truth
Closure	Limited regulation of learning: space for learner agency in accessing knowledge Later: more interventionist and regulative	More politically explicit, but eclectic Later: more systematised	Specific in the identification of the targets for empowerment	Totalising political ideologies

While these themes of role performance and adaptability are ongoing in adult education discourse, during the 1990s more socially critical perspectives were introduced resulting in two new forms of redemptive discourse – empowerment and emancipation. Empowerment seeks to put people in control of their lives by removing whatever is limiting them from becoming makers of their own future, individually and collectively. This can take the form of self and social analysis, changing one's personal beliefs and interpretations which act against one's true interests, thus removing whatever impediments there are to one's capacity for personal and social change. Included are interpretations of Freire's conscientisation and Mezirow's perspective transformation which confine themselves to personal change or, where they aspire to collective change, fall short of seeking to advance specific political solutions. Emancipation is not necessarily radical in the conventional, socio-political sense. It differs from empowerment as a form of redemption in its dualist interpretation of social conditions and in the specificity and closure of its political solutions. The clearest example of emancipatory discourse in recent times is to be found in feminist texts. Earlier manifestations would have been O'Rahilly's Catholic social reconstructionism and, further back, the de-Anglicisation efforts of the Gaelic League. All of these would qualify as emancipatory because of the incorrigibility of their social diagnosis and the inviolability of their prescriptions for change.

While these varieties of redemption differ in their political and ideological substance, they share a similar relationship, one characterised by vanguardism, limited reflexivity, and circumscribed student agency, within adult education between the provider and the participant. There is a consistent desire, of a kind that would be interpreted in the tradition of Nietzsche and Foucault as a 'will to power', to re-engage with adults who are beyond the influence of initial education for the purpose of changing them in ways that they have yet to recognise as beneficial. This subordination of the agency of the adult learner was not a problem for the form of adult education operating in the 1970s when expert knowledge and the innate goodness of education went unquestioned. It runs counter, however, to the expressed principles of some forms of redemption such as those which espouse more populist, participative and egalitarian approaches to learning, its content and authorities, and in the process valorises student autonomy, personal empowerment and self-direction.

This is discursively reconciled by means of the need/entitlement construct. In this, need refers to a personal deficiency, the absence of something which requires to be

put right to establish an equilibrium. Entitlement establishes one's right to have the need satisfied and the obligation of others to make this possible. Whereas need refers to a condition of the individual, entitlement invokes a moral community with responsibilities to one another. In more socially static forms of redemption, the individual's need (for learning, training, literacy, etc.) generates and justifies the entitlement. In more socially- transformative forms of redemption, the need is identified in the context of the moral entitlement to a different type of society in relation to impediments to its realisation in the personal psychology, consciousness and structural position of its proposed beneficiaries.

This orientation to redemption sets horizons on the pursuit of knowledge. This is not necessarily a matter of explicit censorship. Doxic-like (unquestionably obvious), it is more likely to operate from a conviction that core objectives and principles are valid, settled and established, and do not constitute a productive theme for discourse. To suggest otherwise, would be interpreted as a distraction, academicism or reactionary. There are substantive and procedural variations in the light of the variety of redemption involved, and the nature of its closure and vanguard. But the overall pattern is for discourse to follow along predictable textual lines. This takes the form of a 'theoretical glass ceiling' on discourse which excludes whatever might challenge or disrupt key verities. Accordingly, the vast edifice of social, cultural and political theory and, more specifically, adult education thought is only drawn on, if at all, in support of received, established and accepted positions.

Post-structuralism

Feminist discourse on Irish adult education is distinguished from other forms of redemptive adult education in the post-structuralist theoretical perspectives which it introduces on the self, society, the position of women, change, learning and pedagogy in Connolly and Ryan, (1999). Because of this, feminist adult education is theoretically best resourced to interrogate its own practice. This it does to a point. All varieties of redemptive adult education could benefit from the destabilising perspectives of post-structuralism but without the pessimism, indeed cynicism, that can be drawn from Foucault's (1973, p.343) "philosophical laugh". Those most in need are those incorporating the greatest vanguardism, political incorrigibility and circumscribed student agency. This isn't an all-or-nothing affair. Even the loosening up of the defining characteristics of redemption would be liberating, with the potential to re-signify the future as work in progress in which our students would participate, our relationship with them

as shared citizenship rather than as rescuers, and the role of the adult educator as an expert in resources for interpretation. Nor is it necessary that post-structuralism be accepted as a primary orientation. Without attaching themselves to any particular theoretical orthodoxy, O'Brien and Ó Fathaigh (2007) employ post-structuralist orientations on sliding meanings, intertextuality (comprising diverse understandings) and social action in *Learning Partnerships for Social Inclusion*. The empirical sections of the study yield rich and diverse patterns and insights from the experiences of non-traditional adult learners, as well as providers across the community of further and higher education. But, what distinguishes and elevates the study is not the recording of these educational worlds, but rather their positioning within structures of thought and action relating to adults, inequality and education.

Concepts used in this study such as partnership, social inclusion, disadvantage and social capital have been much sloganised in public discourse and in the process, writers such as Bourdieu greatly sinned against in the trivialisation of his constructs. In *Learning Partnerships for Social Inclusion* there is a recognition that these are contested concepts yielding different meanings and capable of being deployed for quite contradictory social and educational projects. The treatment of social capital in particular is exemplary in its delineation of the far-reaching differences between the Americans, Coleman and Putnam and Bourdieu, correctly highlighting the latter's more complex theory of social action exemplified in his concept of *habitus* which he uses to manœuvre between the conflicting poles of voluntarism and structuralism. This doesn't make the challenge of confronting inequality through education during the adult years any easier. But it does acknowledge the hard truth, as Bourdieu himself once argued, that to ask for simple explanations of social life is to invite just that – simplifications. In the process, O'Brien and Ó Fathaigh (2007) prove the virtue of exposing practice to theory and demonstrate that moral purpose and transformative objectives in adult education do not have to mean colonisation of minds and bodies or activities that foreclose on means and ends.

Fleming has long been an advocate of the potential of Habermas's work for educational theory and practice, most recently in Murphy and Fleming (2006) and Fleming (2007). His efforts to faithfully draw on this extensive body of scholarship to articulate a philosophy of adult education demonstrates that redemption doesn't have to be incorrigible in all respects and has the potential to implicate adult education teachers in its specification of ethical communication:

> Adult learning is participatory, critically reflexive, open to new ideas and changing frames of reference. It has a vision of learners engaged in dialogic participatory discourse, collectively seeking ways of changing themselves and society so that all systems, organisations and individuals respond to the needs of others.
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> (Fleming, 1996, p.52)

This isn't to escape redemption. But it doesn't pre-empt political ends or limit the agency of our students and it accommodates, indeed requires, an openness to change among adult educators, including (or so it seems to me) this very philosophy. If I had to give a short statement of my own philosophy of adult education it would differ little. Yet, I would still find myself with questions as I did twenty years ago except that now I have come to see the issues involved as amenable to and demanding a more complex conceptualisation. This would need to engage with, *inter alia,*

- A self that is less integrated and transparent to itself than one might imagine;
- The complexity and volatility of meaning-making given the intertextuality of modern life;
- A model of society and social action that achieves ontological depth;
- Both the restrictive and enabling power of language;
- Uncertainties surrounding the linkages between intention, thought, language, enunciation and reception in dialogue;
- Issues of subjectivity and psychology;
- Multiple circuits of power;
- The potential in the existence of multiple paradigms (interpretive frameworks) for miscommunication and consensual pastiche (superficial agreement).

Fleming's brief definition of his philosophy of adult education reflects the conditions for Habermas's ideal speech situation in the context of the public sphere as well as Mezirow's perspective transformation. It could well be my problem that I find little in Habermas to help me interrogate the issues identified above at the level of practice. He doesn't address these concerns. More to the point, he doesn't provide resources for their scrutiny. Mezirow, in contrast, has always connected with my classroom practice, though I continue to believe that his conceptualisation and systematisation of *perspective* and *transformation* demand greater development. Both Habermas and Mezirow remain strangely remote from recent and contemporary developments in the broad field of the social sci-

ences. In the final section I identify what I describe as a socio-cultural approach from within these developments and sketch its relevance to Habermas's concept of the public sphere. My approach can be anticipated from my use of *paradigm* in policy analysis in preference to *perspective* (along with such similar terms as Foucault's epistemes, Bourdieu's habitus/field, Lakatos's research programmes, Hesse's networks and Quine's webs of belief) and from the manner in which I schematise its components (O'Sullivan, 2005).

A 'Socio-Cultural' Public Sphere

From Habermas's vast repertoire I see most potential in his concept of the public sphere as a model for adult education engagement. A crucial attraction in this for turning theory on ourselves is that it implicates both teachers and students in its prescriptions and theorisation. But I would wish to accommodate some of its critics and expand and differentiate it in the light of shifts within the social sciences that include the various linguistic, discursive and cultural turns. Thus embellished and modified, the theorisation of the public sphere should be capable of supplying a more comprehensive and revealing conceptual literacy to connect with the problems identified above and to interrogate adult education practice in a more nuanced and ontologically-deep manner.

For Habermas (1989), the public sphere refers to a realm of social life in which private individuals come together to discuss public issues. In doing so, they set aside their private interests and identities and communicate as members of a public body. All can participate and contribute on equal terms and the yardstick of agreement is that of the power of reason.

There exists an extensive range of scholarship involving a theoretical engagement with, and practical application of, Habermas's specification and diagnosis of the public sphere and its changing nature and possibilities. Specific applications span a diverse and specialised range of 'publics' and 'counterpublics' (Fraser, 1995) encompassing class, gender, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, language, mass media, etc. While the concept of the public sphere is indeed widely employed across the social sciences, it needs to be acknowledged that it is often used to signify little more than the broadest of discourse about issues with an arguably public relevance. Leaving aside those who find the public sphere an unsatisfactory or unworkable construct, and seek to substitute it with a more generative or appropriate term, two patterns of scholarly response to the concept are relevant here. Firstly, there is the immanent critique of those who, while

continuing to work within the assumptions of the philosophical constructs and ideas involved, identify flaws or difficulties such as its inadequate consideration of constraints on public debate derived from material circumstance, power, inequality, ideology, false consciousness, etc. and its confusion of what might be possible in philosophical debate and the everyday practices of ordinary people (Roderick, 1986). Secondly, there is the development of the concept of the public sphere to incorporate other theoretical approaches and fields such as political science, feminism and sociology (Crossley and Roberts, 2004). While the socio-cultural approach would share the concerns of immanent critique, it identifies more with the aspirations and resources of the developmental school as it attempts to conceptually populate the space for cultural production within the public sphere in a more delineated fashion than appears to have been explicitly attempted to date.

To treat the public sphere as a socio-cultural phenomenon is to foreground the dynamic nature of the relationship between the social and the cultural in shaping the intersubjective engagement that is realised within communication seeking to address public issues. This encompasses the cultural resources available to articulate understandings and prescriptions relating to an issue, such as classifications, concepts, language, discursive forms and formal theories, together with the institutionalised practices relating to the production, circulation and modification of such meanings. A number of preliminary tensions in treating the public sphere as a socio-cultural field need to be stated: its constraining character as reflected in the contrast between the apparently limitless cultural resources of knowledge and method available to be 'googled' into existence and the often predictable flow of public debate; the tension between the humanly created, yet historically received, nature of cultural resources and institutionalised practices; and the often disguised possibilities for change through transgression and creative intervention. By way of short-circuiting a fuller consideration of the methodological/theoretical issues in dealing with the relationship between the social and the cultural, the approach recommended has been described as analytical dualism (Archer, 1996), the practice of treating the social and the cultural as separate for the purpose of analysis to facilitate a greater explanatory leverage on the dynamics of their interaction, rather than identifying and linking the difference between them as reciprocally constituted (conflationism) or treating each as the mere reflection of the other (epiphenomenalism).

The most explicit departure from Habermas in adopting a socio-cultural approach resides in its language and conceptualisation. Habermas's scholarly resources and practices reflect their philosophical/historical origins with the result that distinctions such as system/lifeworld are not comfortably grafted to delineations of the social order drawn from sociology and cultural studies in a manner that maintains their emergent qualities. This also follows from his theoretical/universalistic project which seeks to construct what Bourdieu refers to as 'theoretical theory' (Wacquant, 1995), a form of system building that establishes the universal conditions necessary for public discussion following rational critical conventions to claim legitimacy in the determination of norms which people are obliged to follow.

Likewise, there is a foreclosing on what have been described as discursive and cultural turns in sociology. These for their part adopt a scepticism towards such aspects of Habermas's enlightenment world view as a, relatively straightforward referential system that through the agency of a communicatively competent subject, connects given utterances to a world of objects, motive or norms (Gardiner, 2004), the perfectability of procedures for the sending and reception of signs, and a confidence in the capacity of critical theory to deliver its emancipatory potential rather than its coercive pitfalls. Nonetheless, the approach recommended here is normative and does not turn its back on a transformative function for adult education. It shares with Habermas the enlightenment aspiration to free people from 'tutelage', whatever its provenance, including that which is 'self-incurred' (Kant, 1784;1959) and is true to critical theory's orientation to betterment and change. Rather than articulate from above, the conditions necessary for the status of public sphere, as Habermas does, this analysis works from below to evaluate the dynamics of the public sphere in terms of what practices, resources and knowledge it provides in substantive contexts and projects, such as those involved in adult education, to enhance democratic deliberation. Unlike critical theory, however, the approach comes, to borrow from Giddens (1994, p.21) "without guarantees".

Another reworking of the public sphere that connects with the socio-cultural approach is the postmodern/feminist critique most notably associated with the work of Fraser (1992; 1995). This is because of its emphasis on diversity and its questioning of the modernist assumptions of Habermas. Running counter to the universalism of Habermas is the argument that social and historical forces are at play in determining participation in social and public life and the mechanisms and protocols employed to come to agreement in public debate. Fraser

sees the merit of the public sphere in situating, "discursive processes in their social institutional context… enabl(ing) us to study the ways in which culture is embedded in social structure and affected by social relations of domination… thus provid(ing) an alternative to the sort of free-floating, decontextualised discourse analysis that disassociates cultural studies from critical theory" (1995, p.288). But she questions some of its constitutive modernist liberal assumptions. These include the failure to acknowledge that social equality is a necessary condition for social democracy, the inadequacy of the public/private dualism and the gendered nature of what is worthy of public concern, deliberation and legal intervention. She diagnoses the existence of "subaltern counterpublics" to signal "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses", having the effect of expanding "discursive space" and ideally forcing public argument about assumptions and themes that had previously been exempt from contestation (1995, p.291). Such substantive extensions of the democratic public sphere, have been further expanded and diversified in the work of Young (1990; 1996) and Cohen (1996).

In its application to adult education engagements, the socio-cultural approach seeks to de-gloss the cultural realm through its conceptual delineation while stressing the intertextuality of its production. It conceives of students and teachers as embedded within institutional and social settings with a less than integrated and transparent self than Habermas' theories assume. In the context of polyvalent (multi-meaning) communication, it advocates an acceptance of other discursive forms besides those of measured, linear, articulate debate. Conceptualised in this manner, adult education engagements become a feature of a diversified public sphere with distinctive discursive practices, norms and constraints (Cohen, 1996). In this, teachers are distinguished from students as experts in resources for interpretation but they may also be found to adopt other such subjectivities as 'free floating' (Mannheim) or 'organic' (Gramsci) intellectual.

Conclusion

This article has argued that as adult educators we should not be outside the remit of our own theorising. It began by outlining an earlier effort to construct an ethical grammar to audit the probity of working to change others through adult education and sought to situate it in terms of contemporary debate about truth and certainty in understanding and changing the world. The context was identified as the challenge of maintaining a transformative role for adult education while respecting the integrity of our students as co-participants in this process.

A constraint on turning theory on ourselves in facing this challenge lies in the dominance of redemption in Irish adult education thought and practice, the aspiration to 'put things right', be it in terms of skill deficiencies, limited perspectives, inappropriate beliefs and feelings or a flawed social order. This is done in the interests of the student, but from the standpoint of the adult educator. In this, the function of the adult educator to variously expand, develop, re-skill, lead and enlighten is unquestioned. Students are construed as beneficiaries and not without justification. Yet, the effect can itself be limiting and restrictive.

The more encompassing the designs of adult education, the more they engage the totality of a person's identity and worldview and disempower them from thinking and acting otherwise. Even a skill-based programme that doesn't directly appear to be personally or ideologically invasive can often be restrictive in the social and political aspects of the learning that it leaves unexplored.

I identified some examples of writing on adult education that proclaim a transformative role without succumbing, in whole or in part, to a redemptive orientation. In such instances, one finds the future envisioned as a work in progress, in which students and teachers participate. In this, students are active creators of themselves and their world rather than recipients and beneficiaries of the visions of others. Adult education teachers become experts in resources for interpretation, a more humble role than the enlightenment and leadership of others. But, given a view of the self as incorporating multiple subjectivities (ways of being oneself in such a public sphere), there is also space for teachers to declare their own beliefs and to do so with passion and conviction. Adult educators can be "diverse persona" in the classroom if they free themselves up as sharers and proclaimers rather than incorporators, however well-intentioned.

To envision adult education engagements as a specific manifestation of a diversified public sphere is to establish them as a designated setting in which ideas and practices are brought into contact and in which students are helped to develop and employ cultural resources (language, concepts, accounts, explanations, theories etc.) for understanding how they and the world might best be understood and changed. There are other social arrangements for the discussion of public issues such a voluntary and community groups, mass media and political debate, but the educative role of adult education needs to be highlighted, as a contribution that will not be available elsewhere with such systematic coverage or earlier in the educational system in relation to such ideological issues because of the developmental vulnerability of younger students.

Operating according to this vision of adult education is not a straightforward task. There are challenges in communication, personal psychology, the level of resources that can be circulated, restraints from contemporary ideologies and practices, understanding of the self and social action that it is possible to achieve, and the inevitability of often hidden circuits of power, interest and defence. And there are no guarantees as to what people will want or what transformations might follow. Just like democracy.

I can only speak of my own dilemmas as an adult educator and my search for theoretical resources to engage with them. Far from resolving them, at most I find myself with accommodations, holding positions and bracketed issues, all of which are necessary if nihilism and disablement are to be avoided. Inevitably these are products of my own individual positioning and cultural biography. Yet, the issues involved go to the heart of educational and social life and include communication, meaning-making, culture, social action, individual and social change, human agency and social justice. As I have indicated, I have come to regard these as even more complex than I had imagined and, accordingly, demanding a more elaborate and interdisciplinary theorisation. Does anyone share these dilemmas? If so, how have they engaged with them? If not, has this article prompted them to question their practice? I have written in a spirit of on-going inquiry and would welcome responses to any aspect of it.

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