



A Golden Age for Adult Education: The Collective Disorienting Dilemma

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Abstract

The continuing challenge of engaging adult learners in the process of positive social change has summoned adult educators to a new understanding of their role as change agents in an increasingly complex world. Despite all obstacles presented by our contemporary culture, the nature of adult development continues to offer opportunities for adult educators to respond to adults' need to understand their world, their place in it and their growth. This paper examines the historic nature of adult education and the unique opportunity presented to adult educators presented by the rapidity of contemporary culture and the stunning nature of current events.

A Brief Review of Literature

Despite the long history of adult education in the United States (Stubblefield & Keane, 1994), the nature, purpose and theoretical foundations of adult education continue to offer a rich source of discussion from which adult educators may draw a deeper understanding of their role in society. In many respects the dialogue surrounding adult education offers a model of adult education and the means by which adults engage in learning and discovery and arrive at understanding (Habermas, 1984).

The process of adult education begins with individual adult learners motivated to solve a problem (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). That motivation may emerge from the circumstances of adult living that include job training, personal enhancement or adult life transition but the origins of the drive to seek new learning do not limit the scope or range of learning that results from the initial pursuit of education (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). The dynamic nature of contemporary life presents problems to adults (Kegan, 1994; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Adults differ from other learners in their ability to think critically, assessing their situation and seeking answers through education. The history of adult education in the United States demonstrates the influence of education as an avenue for social change (Stubblefield & Keane, 1994). From early literacy movements to voter education to the human potential and women's and civil rights movement, adult education has answered needs not met by formal education (Stubblefield & Keane, 1994). While adult education may be conceived in problem-solving behavior associated with adult ability to think critically and adapt (Brookfield, 1987; Kegan, 1994), the promise of positive social change associated with adults thinking, naming and acting in the world represents the true function of adult education.

The ability of adults to engage in critical thinking distinguishes adult learning from content education such as job training, personal enhancement and life transition (Kegan, 1994; Mezirow, 1990). The

foundations of education which addressed the nature of adult learning were articulated by Dewey (1939) who recognized that the context which an adult brings to learning requires integration within the framework of prior experience. Dewey suggested that the model for adult learning was founded in the scientific method used in the laboratory. The use of a scientific process which tests ideas, observes and tracks outcomes and reflects on the results to extract meaning allows adults to reconstruct the understanding of the notions being examined based on the new knowledge. The theoretical framework informing this approach is constructivist, a cognitive process in which learners develop their own knowledge from their experiences as both individual experience and socially interactive exchange (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). While it may be limited to individual growth, it may also reach beyond individual experience to learning developed through social discourse and communication.

Lindeman (1926) suggested a holistic model for adult learning through real life situations, not subjects. His perspective embraced the learner's experience as a source of for learning over the life span. The goals were non-vocational, focused on finding joy and meaning in life from the unique, non-standardized experience of the world. Lindeman's work was foundational in the introduction of andragogy and that adult learning was realized in the social experience of adults (Brookfield, 1984). His work in presenting small groups models and the critique of accepted structures was instrumental in the work of Knowles and Freire which followed (Brookfield, 1984).

Knowles (1980) assumptions concerning adult learning are founded in the self-directed nature of adult learning, respect for the influence of adults' prior experience on learning, developmental roles which demand immediate application of new knowledge and internal motivation.

These models of adult learning articulate a perspective that reinforces the individual nature of learning and the unique nature of each adult's perspective. The contextualized nature of each adult's view of the world establishes a schema or mental model which acts as a foundation from which adults consider the ongoing experience of their lives and from which they make meaning (Anderson, 1996). Schemas represent a way of organizing data and understanding the world which allows people to function without continually reconstructing experiences and act as a foundation for cognitive experience (Anderson, 1996; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

Communicating Across Individual Experiences

The challenge to reach across our individual schemas that we all nurture as "truth" and to understand each other emerges as we attempt to communicate across each individual experience to form a shared understanding of the world. The need for an individual perspective, or as Gadamer (1989) put it "our horizon of understanding (347)," is necessary to adult functioning in the world but the challenge according to Gadamer (1989) is in understanding another's horizon through conversation which may lead to a mutual horizon.

Jurgen Habermas (1971) emphasized the centrality of communication to the experience of human development, focusing on the need for

language which is comprehensible, true, justified and sincere. Like Gadamer (1989), Habermas recognized that the truth had to be uncovered through communication with the goal of eliminating distortions, revealing unacknowledged interests and inviting all into the democratic process.

Habermas (1984) distinguished between the systems world which is represented by the major institutional structures of the contemporary state and the lifeworld which is represented by the everyday experiences of individual community members. The dominance of the systems world, which uses quantitative media to influence the qualitative process of understanding values and the discussion of differences, disables communication, a process Habermas referred to as "colonization." The colonization of communication creates doubts about the legitimacy of the institutions of the nation state and turns individuals from participants in civic life to clients of the state, seeking services, uncommitted to the health and vitality of civic life and unable to communicate across differences. The central purpose of adult learning in contemporary society in Habermas' view is to foster approaches which encourage the broadest and most open communication activity among adults. The challenge to adult educators is in devising pedagogical structures which teach community members how to communicate for a democratic society.

This is complicated by the extraordinary complexity of the industrial capitalist society and what Habermas refers to as the collapse of the public sphere (1991). There is no common space in which to create a free exchange of ideas which might bring about positive social change. Public opinion emerges from a type of echo chamber that attempts to capture the concerns of the public, process them through the feedback of print, electronic and digital outlets and then draw conclusions about what that opinion might be.

The fragmentation of communication or, as Habermas referred to it—colonization—represented by the various outlets from which information can be obtained, all aligned with the advancement of competing agendas, exacerbates individual isolation, reinforcing the narrow perspective which supports each person's view. As Habermas noted, the technological and economic determinants of the systems world dictate the lifeworld outcomes which force citizens into the specialized roles associated with vocational and interest areas and fail to prepare them for engagement in public discourse. Even research in the area of adult education has been pushed to the margins of relevancy by the dominance of the economic model which has co-opted adult education as a human capital endeavor with an almost exclusive emphasis on skills training for professional application (Kett, 1994). While an ability to meet role demands and apply skills immediately meets the educational need of most adults as recognized by Lindeman (1926), the need to understand the skills necessary for engagement in public sphere discourse are allowed to atrophy from neglect. Jarvis presents a picture of individuals whose lives are divided by the demands of their career and their private lives and the non-reflective routinization of the lifeworld (1991).

Habermas recognized three types of knowledge as fundamental to adult learning: technical (related to labor and survival); practical (related to human interaction and interpretation); and emancipatory (related to

freedom from oppression) (1971). The dominance of technical knowledge has influenced adult education through the emphasis on human resource development. Habermas believed that social systems like business organizations are designed to maintain that social system (1976). The goal of those systems seeks to create the same schema across individual differences reflecting the goals and systems which support the organization (Argyris, 1993; Senge, 1990). The homogenization of thought results in indoctrination that the goals of the organization are actually the goals of the individual (Kincheloe, 1991). The organization may cede lesser decisions to their members thereby diminishing any move on the part of adult workers to challenge the dominant model that meaningful decision-making is appropriate only at the highest level.

The need for adult education to foster the development of skills which promote the free exchange of ideas was the central focus of Paulo Freire. His model of emancipatory education provided in his groundbreaking work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), offered a model which reestablishes the primacy of adult education as the means to developing the skills to engage in discourse and eventually movement toward critical consciousness. Freire's model of emancipatory adult education rejects what he referred to as the 'banking' system of education in which preselected data is deposited in the mind of the adult learner. Instead, Freire invites learners into the process of examining their experiences from a critical perspective and, through discourse, challenge the contradictions they may have experienced. An examination of this type, founded in an action-reflection-action cycle of building knowledge known as praxis, is grounded in self-determination, intentionality, creativity and rationality and is accomplished by the exchange of ideas for which language is a critical component. The ability to engage in discussion with others who are examining the reality of their experience and reflecting on that reality critically creates a new realization which leads to action for positive social change. Freire termed this adult reflective response 'conscientization,' and when it takes place with other learners it offers the potential to transform the world.

The pitfall of educational processes as articulated by Jarvis (1992) lies in the paradox that learning is a means to encourage conformity while also offering an avenue to social change. The clear need for adult education which brings about positive social change is further suggested by Jarvis (1992) assertion that if adults are free to pursue their own interests the possibility of radical change founded in massive creative thinking might result in massive instability and government intervention to maintain the structures of the systems world. Jarvis offers a perspective that supports stable systems which are able to support the possibility for learning and change without destabilization.

The Promise of Adult Education

Yet the value of adult education to create positive social change is unmistakable. The primary promise of adult education lies in the creation of alternatives and options associated with positive social change. Adults are offered new ways of reflecting on their experiences by engaging in dialogue and creating options for action and further reflection. This leads to transformation and becomes an ongoing experience of growth, influencing the social context in which learning takes place, connecting adults in the

process of dialogue and positive social change and the opportunity for a greater range of choices (Cranton, 1996). Having options from which to choose continues the process of growth by continuing to expose adults to new situations they must critically assess through which growth will continue to take place.

Therefore, the levers of positive social change lie in the development of skills in the use of language and communication within the public sphere. That discourse leads to Gadamer's individual horizons which become shared visions of the future. The key is founded in Habermas' assertion that communication leads to action which is guided by understanding, not the narrowly defined self-interest of each individual. Understanding can only be founded in the dialogue which takes place in the public space. The challenge lies in creating a public space in which the hard work of praxis, conscientization and adult learning that guides action can take place and then engaging adults in a compelling dialogue that breaks through isolation and alienation (Habermas, 1991). That is the means to understanding who we as participants in our own lifeworld are and engaging in positive social change.

The issues which may have most influence on the possibilities represented by adult education to influence positive social change are 1) the recognition that there is a need for a public sphere in which learners may engage in reasoned, reflective discourse and the motivation to pursue praxis; 2) the ability of adult educators to provide opportunities which allow adult learners to master the skills necessary to encourage a reasoned, reflective dialogue; and 3) the ethical practice of adult education which invites social dialogue and critical reflective practice.

Hannah Arendt conveyed the crisis of fragmentation which threatens the possibility of public sphere engagement (1991). Technology has created a multiplicity of avenues for the exchange of information overwhelming individuals' ability to discern which information is meaningful and which is a distraction to reflective discourse. This postmodern perspective creates a crisis of fragmentation in which individuals focus on their own horizon (Gadamer, 1989) of the future, gravitating to those sources of information which reinforce and justify their own perspective. The ability of learners to reflect critically on their experiences and to extract meaning which informs action and further reflection or praxis is limited rather than expanded by the cacophony of sources and the need to maintain a stable vision of the future. The lack of a common dialogue limits praxis since the risk of change is not offset by the promise of positive outcomes (Jarvis, 1992).

The Collective Disorienting Dilemma

In order to create the understanding necessary to compel a public dialogue, the civic space may need to experience a collective disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 1998) which draws adult learners into the process of questioning, the exchange of ideas, reflection, action and perspective transformation. The option for conscientization and emancipatory learning founded in adults' own experiences and the recognition of the wisdom available in common dialogue (Lindeman, 1926; Freire, 1970) may only be possible through a crisis in the systems world that impinges on the stability of the lifeworld (Habermas, 1984).

Two events have created the potential for the collective disorienting dilemma: 1) the threat to free discourse brought by international terrorism and made real by the attack of 9/11; and 2) the economic crisis currently creating instability in financial markets. The fear and anger which has accompanied these events has drawn individual adult learners into a reflective process (Mezirow, 2000) and created a focus on the need for dialogue which addresses the crisis in the systems world. The client of the state is now understanding that the issues which affect the lifeworld are about civic involvement and the need to become involved in the dialogue may be necessary (Habermas, 1984).

From an historical perspective, the instability that was created by the Great Depression and from which emerged the programs of an activist government were functioning in ways that contributed to citizens becoming clients of the state, demanding services from the bureaucracy. As long as the needs of the client were met, a stable lifeworld experience reinforced the structure of the systems world. That stability discouraged any question of authority or power within the structure except by groups who recognized oppression and demanded a dialogue around the structure of the society (hooks, 1994). The issues which feminist and civil rights groups surfaced were focused on questioning the social arrangement and were based in critical theory as presented by Habermas (1984) and articulated by Mezirow (1998). The larger dialogue influenced the dominance of technological learning as a means of knowledge creation over either practical or emancipatory learning. The instability of the current crises may represent the disorienting dilemmas which re-engage adult learners in the civic dialogue which leads to critical reflection, praxis and emancipatory learning.

The two most noteworthy social movements in contemporary time—the Tea Party movement and the "Occupy" movement—are emblematic of a restless acknowledgement that the process of civil engagement no longer responds to the problems society faces. Our faith in the traditional responses to current issues has been eroded by the frustration of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The collective disorienting dilemma created by the events of 9/11 resulted in a response drawn from old problem-solving models. The notion of responding to foreign attack by using the military power of the nation state was counterintuitive to the real threat of irregular warfare. While successful in conventional conflict, fire power offered no advantage against the tactics of insurgency. The solutions from another era offered no quick resolution. We are now faced with the continuing challenge of terrorism and international criminal behavior while struggling to finance wars abroad, entitlement programs at home and monetary bailouts of institutions which operate in a digital world monitored by regulations developed in a pre-digital world.

As centers of power are threatened by failed policies, polarized political agents of the systems world stake out positions which eschew civil dialogue and foment scorn for any view diverging from the chosen ideology. Followers flock to media outlets which reflect only those views confirming assumptions. Gadamer's common horizon becomes a fractured reflection of the numerous conflicting ideologies informing the lifeworld.

The option to tap the restless energy of the Tea Party and Occupy

movements suggests the value that adult education may offer. Our collective disorienting dilemma may provide the impetus for adult educators to provide options for engaged dialogue that crosses horizons and finds ways for the common horizon to emerge.

Re-invigorating the public sphere as a place in which adult learners join together to create mutual understanding is the role adult education must embrace and promote. The role of adult education is situated at the margins of the academy (Glowacki-Dudka & Helvie-Mason, 2004). The dialogue concerning the role of adult education and whether it should continue to operate from the margins as source for questioning assumptions about power and the structures of the systems world (Collins, 1992) or move to consolidate practice and seek greater professionalization (Cervero, 1992) would seem to miss the point. Professionalization may address the issues which are related to the concerns of adult educators and their role in the professional hierarchy (Glowacki-Dudka & Helvie-Mason, 2004) but may not accelerate the ability to reach adults in the spaces in which they seek adult learning experiences. The traditional approaches represented by autonomous learning groups, community development groups and community action groups are available as avenues to encourage skills building in reflective discourse (Hugo, 2002). Groups can be organized through engagement in political action or through existing structures such as education, religious and professional associations. Adult educators have the opportunity to offer training to leaders of these groups in the promotion of skills related to praxis, critical reflection and consensual governance (Freire, 1970). Additionally, adult learners may be invited into the process of participatory research through local groups formed to address specific challenges (Ellis, 1993; Freire, 1970; Stein & Imel, 2002). Local engagement in the creation of knowledge represents a model for continuing growth and a meaningful invitation into the public sphere which may open avenues for lifeworld influences to influence systems world through positive social change.

Involvement in training with communities of practice offers an avenue for furthering the model of adult learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1999) and positive social change. We are social beings who learn in community, seeking competence, and finding meaning through engagement in the world and the learning it yields (Wenger, 1999, 4). Adult educators may become the resource to communities of practice in facilitating the option for praxis. This offers the greatest opportunity to contribute to positive social change since communities of practice are integral to identity formation (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Merriam, Courtenay & Baumgartner, 2003).

Cranton (1994) presents a view that would address the more fundamental issue of how adult educators may influence the skill development necessary to re-invigorate the civic dialogue through the ways that are more conventionally associated with training. Typically adults associate training with skills that can be immediately applied (Knowles, 1980). The process of work and social training that might be more available to adults may be another avenue to provide the skills necessary for transformative development which may then be applied in the pursuit of positive social change (Cranton, 1994).

The possibility for creating a new public sphere for discussion may lie in the technology of distance learning from the standpoint of inviting learners on a wide scale into the exchange of ideas (Spencer, 1994). Critical assessment of distance education suggests that the focus on technology and traditional modes of education used in a distance model is a misuse of the opportunity to provide adult learners with options for self-direction and autonomy within a discourse centered pedagogy (Spencer, 1994). The phenomenon of social networking which contributed to the Arab Spring movement and provides options for communication that transcend the ideological divide may act as a source for sparking a public dialogue. Adult educators may be witnessing a unique opportunity, a convergence of technology which may serve the interests of adult education and positive social growth by removing barriers to reflective action.

The methods that adult educators use in these spaces—either digital or face-to-face—present situations in which learners may begin to assimilate the skills of reflection, action and reflection which contribute to positive social change. The most critical aspect is allowing learners to develop the skills necessary for self-directed learning by encouraging learners to engage in determining as many aspects of the learning experience as may be offered (Lindeman, 1926; Freire, 1970). Engaging in reflective discourse to reach understanding, encouraging learners to set learning goals, holding learners responsible for the means of achieving the goals and recognizing learners contributions to the process offer experiences of learning which may then become a foundation for positive social change as learners internalize the role of engaged member of the community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Listening to adults as co-learners models the process of learning which encourages adult learners to accept increasing responsibility for positive action (Vella, 2002). This offers power to learners through praxis and empowerment (Freire, 1970), a foundation to movement for positive social change.

The final aspect of fulfilling the role of adult education lies in the ethical practice of adult education. The experience which adults bring to the learning event taken with the context of the event influences the meaning which is derived from it (Merriam & Cafferella, 1999). The ability of the adult educator to respect the worldview drawn from each adult's experience and invite reflective dialogue with others whose views differ is critical to the experience of positive social change (Choules, 2007; Vella, 2002). The perspective the adult educator brings to learning is crucial to the ethical practice of adult education for positive social change. Technical perspectives (traditional), humanistic perspectives (people-oriented, learner-centered), social action perspectives (empowerment and emancipation) and postmodern perspectives (acceptance of interpretive and contradictory perspectives) each present unique challenges to ethical practice (Cranton, 1996). The critical factor in providing ethical adult education practice is the ability of the adult educator to engage learners in the questioning, reflection, action and reflection process with a transparency that allows dialogue respecting all views and yet questioning assumptions. The goal is to hold a perspective which accepts and supports learner goals without imposing an agenda of social change that learners may not recognize or accept. Ethical learning is a process characterized by trust and integrity in which all participants—learners and educators—share openly, challenge respectfully and listen humbly for the areas which

agreement can be formed to build the positive social change which renews the civil society and gives purpose and meaning to the lives of its members.

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 [Contents](#)

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