

Emancipatory Dialogue and Critical Consciousness in an Era of Discontent

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America is on fire. It has been for some time. High rents and gentrification are forcing low-income and working-class people from their homes in urban centers. Homelessness remains an issue. Funding for public secondary education is being stripped across all levels in almost every state. Hegemonic forces conspire on a daily basis to maintain the status quo. The incarceration rate for people of color is decidedly too high. Wall Street reaches record highs with regularity while opioids tighten their grip on communities across the country. Water supplies in cities around the country are contaminated, and there is not a fix in sight. These are widely known issues. And while they are witnessed by everyone, the suffering is nearly universal for those I interact with in the working class and lower-income brackets. It is less so for those of means.

Making matters worse, there seems to be little in the way of actual discourse between individuals with differing viewpoints. Information being shared on the internet and in classrooms around the country finds like-minded audiences. That is to say consumers of information are drawn to those topics and resources already aligned with their belief systems, or confirmation bias. And when exposed to an opposing viewpoint, the reaction is often visceral, hurtful and offensive. This is magnified through tools such as Twitter and Facebook which afford complete strangers the ability to denounce another's point of view without so much as a nominal exchange of ideas. Individuals facing similar problems, yet refusing to engage in meaningful conversation in an effort to arrive at shared solutions represents self-oppression in its rawest form. For when we refuse to engage in discourse, we refuse to grow in any substantial way. It is a toxic behavior which threatens our very existence. It is something I see every day and, in my opinion, the single greatest challenge facing America today.

In order to combat this reality, we must turn to adult education as a tool for emancipatory learning, though not simply in exposing hegemony and power. Rather, the preeminent challenge for adult educators is cultivating meaningful relationships through dialogue so as to foster critical thinking and empower learners to take decisive action toward social change via empathy and understanding. In order to demonstrate why emancipatory learning through dialogue will have the greatest impact on the profession and practice of adult education in the future, this paper will do three things: First, it will explore a specific definition of adult education which values relationships and dialogue, discussing how this definition holds more promise for emancipatory learning than teacher-student models. Next, it will examine iterations of community-based and workplace adult education currently in practice and how they perpetuate oppression of the working class and low-income individuals. Finally, it will look at several community-learning models dedicated to dialogue and discuss how these have the ability to unite the working class/low-income individuals and foster emancipatory learning.

Before moving forward, let's define adult education, which is not an easy task as there are many iterations and applications in action. To be sure, this is not a bad thing. The diversity in the field allows adult education professionals to reach all manner of learner and satisfy multiple learning needs. For example, human resource development (HRD) applies largely behaviorist methodologies to adult education practice in the workplace or on workforce education outside direct organizational constructs. Adult education through a humanist lens can take the form of self-help groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous through which personal experience centers learning. TED Talks are decidedly liberal in their execution. Each has purpose. Each has independent value. And while there are many more examples to explore, most fall short of being emancipatory, as they don't foster critically transitive consciousness, or a "(d)epth in the

interpretation of problems...the testing of one's 'findings' and by openness to revision," and "the practice of dialogue rather than polemics" (Freire, 1974, p. 14). It is through these machinations we break through confirmation bias and allow individuals to come together in a way which incites large-scale social change.

Adult education, as a liberatory enterprise, then, is best understood as a process in which dialogue plays a dominant role. In the eyes of Freire, for example, "The role of adult education is, through dialogue with learners, to facilitate acquisition of critical consciousness. Once learners become conscious of the forces that control their lives, they become empowered, and empowerment leads to action" (Merriam & Brockett, 2007, p. 43). Further, per Kasl and Yorks (2016), adult education is based in reflection, involves multiple way of knowing which extend beyond quantitative measurements and is based in dialogue and the critically reflective practice which follows exposure to others' points of view. Lastly, adult education is a human right. Examining the MOVA-Brasil Project, based on Freire's Youth and Adult Literacy Movement, Gadotti (2011) writes:

It seems obvious to all of us that education is necessary for the achievement of each person's freedom and the exercise of their citizenship rights, for their work, for making people more autonomous and happier. Education is necessary for the survival of the human being. So that he does not need to invent everything again, he needs to borrow from culture, from what humanity has already produced. If this was important in the past, today it is even more decisive, in a knowledge-based society

In my work, I consistently bring up the past in an effort to inform the present and impact the future. I focus on critically examining what's transpired in order to frame context and illicit involvement. A conversation on the reasons Fred Hampton was assassinated contextualizes

current radicalism. It also allows for personal experience to become part of the conversation as there is no one correct answer. There are multiple interpretations of the same information and the process of analyzing these differences allows us to test our “findings” and, through reflexive practice, incorporate new information into our knowledge structures. In this dialogue, there is no teacher, only learners. Through conversation and the exchange of ideas, we form greater understandings. We can then take those understandings and apply them to our other relationships. This is the path toward and outcomes of critical consciousness.

Taken in sum, then, adult education is a public and political activity. It is conducted (or should be) in spaces open to all. Community centers and schools, for example, are fine examples of adult education settings which can be used as a space for dialogue. Unfortunately, these public spaces as opportunities for the realization of critical consciousness are under attack. From Stromquist (2014):

Freire, through his later writings, clearly utilizes the school as a public sphere, and deepens this by using the classroom as a site to discuss daily life. It must be remarked, however, that as schooling is becoming increasingly segregated by social class throughout the world, this public space will suffer as it also becomes homogenous by social class and the opportunities for exchange of different experiences and points of view are diminished. (p. 554)

Finally, if adult education is to be truly emancipatory as defined here, it must break away from simply passing down what the instructor considers to be a truth. Rather, emancipatory education is about equality in the relationship between teacher and student (Galloway, 2015). Through this association, certain levels of empathy are achieved, including Heron’s presentational knowing, or an individual’s “intuitive grasp of imaginal patterns,” becomes integrated into another’s practical

knowing, or “whole-person knowing”. Through whole-person knowing, we then achieve “whole-person dialogue” in which two people engage in the “feelings, ideas, and actions from within the other’s life world” (Kasl & Yorks, 2016, pp. 6-7). This emancipatory process requires critical consciousness, which is, again, only achieved through a dialogic process which redefines the way teachers and learners interact.

As it currently stands, unfortunately, the practice of adult education rarely reaches emancipatory levels. If we are being critical, actually, most education programs are the antithesis of the definition delineated above as they have at their heart the idea education should make learners economically viable within our current market structure and, through this economic viability, learners achieve social equality. Truth be told, this is what many adults want from their educational efforts. From Blaszcak (2013):

Among adults, professional development and career are commonly recognized as positive and desired values. Achievement of social prestige is possible due to the increase of the level of knowledge and gaining new skills. Professional career and success at work constitute values, which are to be gained via education in successful organisations (Błaszczak, 2012, pp. 74-75). Therefore, both employers and employees ought to be interested in developing professional competence and its constant improvement. (p. 306)

What this tells us is the challenge in developing adult education programs which achieve emancipatory ends for the working class must not only change intended learning objectives, but also change public perception of what is a desirable outcome. For example, I often encounter learners less likely to appreciate concepts related to an understanding on how lessons learned in the workplace transfer into their communities. This esoteric application of qualitative training exercises simply holds less intrinsic value for staff than learning a skill which will eventually

lead to an increase in pay. They are that far removed from seeing the benefits of increased community engagement. Dialogue is a way in which to engage learners toward an end which allows them to find value in those things which do not directly impact themselves.

Even programs purportedly designed to directly impact communities fall short. A program in Humboldt Park, Chicago, for example is ostensibly about preserving Puerto Rican heritage in a rapidly gentrifying city. Through all the talk of meeting the holistic needs of community learners, however, the program is ultimately one which strives to create “self-sufficiency through the production, distribution, and consumption” of locally sources goods (Bruce & Bloch, 2013, p. 33). There are aspects of the program which focus on community engagement and understanding heritage in a changing urban landscape, of course, but the root goal is economic sustainability and there is nary a mention of a critical relationship between student and learner and there is zero attempt to work with learners toward an understanding of others’ perspectives. When we fail to engage learners in dialogue, we fail to provide growth. Sure, new skills are learned, but these skills do not improve an individual’s ability to interact with others outside their direct community. Nor do they increase critical thinking and the ability to engage in whole-person dialogue. What they do is maintain the status quo while providing the illusion of social change.

Workplace adult education is also a manifestation of oppressive intent in adult education as they are driven by economic interests, not social ones. Citing Fenwick (2001), for example, Smith (2014) writes, “HRD in adult education wields soft control through surveillance, classification, normalization, deficit assumptions, cultural engineering, workers’ self-regulation and learning demands that relies on market models to influence” curriculum (p. 2). There are specified outcomes, leaving little room for independent knowledge construction or the fusion of

past experience into meaning-making. This prevents individuals from participating in adult education activities in either political capacities or in public spaces. Another thing to consider is the fact market-driven learning is decidedly middle class and excludes (or at the very least, precludes) low-income and working-class individuals from experiencing full educational benefit, furthering class disparity. As Gerrard (2013) writes:

Although the experience of being middleclass is lived and felt very differently across national, geographical, and cultural contexts, the middle class has more successfully adapted to market-based systems of schooling, while the working class has not; this difference has exacerbated significant social class inequality in education. (p. 196)

To be sure, we must engage with market factors if for no other reason than to take the dialogue around oppression past identifying the actors. Further, simply naming the problem (and its agents) may lead to compartmentalized education. Without question, there is “significant value in — and need for — interrogating taken-for-granted conceptualizations of social power that obfuscate or exclude the multiple operations of power, including gender, race, sexuality, disability, age, and so on” (Gerrard, 2013, p. 190). Such a fine view, however, risks overstating opportunities for social equality and/or glossing over the absolute ability for education to “disturb neoliberal ‘common sense’ through connecting classroom learning to analyses of, and challenges to the social, cultural and material inequalities of everyday life” (Martin, 1988, as cited in Gerrard, 2013, p. 190).

As an example, I recently attended a workshop delivered on a proposed tax currently on next year’s ballot in Illinois. In this workshop, the facilitator focused almost exclusively on identifying major players opposed to the tax and how they intend to keep individuals squarely in their current economic situations. It was all about power being exercised at the expense of the

oppressed. And this is good. That said, the conversation was not inclusive and did not go deeper into the core of what this exercising of power did on a daily basis and how by passing the measure, we would dramatically alter not only the social landscape, but the political one. Additionally, he did not go into how such a measure would impact other battles being fought on behalf of the working class and low-income residents in Illinois. He narrowly defined the intended message, did not engage in dialogue with learners and missed an opportunity to have a larger conversation on the interplay of grassroots efforts and how coordination between organizations can take disruption to neoliberal systems past mere inconveniences. What this demonstrates, then, is dialogue is paramount to rich understandings of what oppresses and what is possible, of how marketed solutions for social woes contribute to perpetuating inequality and how individuals within communities can realistically impact their social station within society.

As important, dialogue generates empathy, and empathy grounds conversation in shared understandings and promotes whole-person interaction across political, social and personal differences. Empathy across divides is often difficult, however. From Kasl and Yorks (2016):

The continuum of hegemonic embeddedness describes conscious awareness of personal relationship to hegemony. At one pole, people are unaware that they have accepted cultural norms uncritically; they have internalized hegemony as “the right way to be” and occupy the hegemonic center. People at the hegemonic center can be members of the privileged group or of marginalized subgroups. At the other pole are people who are critically aware of how hegemony affects their lives; they inhabit the hegemonic periphery. Again, they may belong to either kind of group—privileged or marginalized. People in the hegemonic periphery who are members of marginalized groups typically develop double consciousness as a way of adapting to a society dominated by others (Du

Bois, 1903/1994). This double consciousness provides information about the dominating worldview from an outsider's location, which is qualitatively different from inhabiting a shared space of empathic connection. (pp. 7-8)

This is something I am particularly passionate about and often exposed to as an open socialist. Many of my political associates, for example, are very rigid in their interpretations of political doctrine and make no room for contextualizing political activity. This is dangerous as there are many factors to be taken into consideration before beginning any type of political activity. It is not as simple as they are wrong and we are right, though many I work with operate under that assumption. I am constantly working to engage in dialogue in an effort to help them find the why behind another person's viewpoint. This is especially important as many of the individuals fighting to maintain oppressive structures are themselves oppressed. We cannot assume they are acting from a position of knowledge. Hegemonic forces from the state and their church may be at play. They may not have access to information. They may just be scared of change and are fighting to hold on to what they know as it's what's comfortable to them. They have likely developed the double consciousness Kasl and Yorks (2016) describe.

Whatever the cause, we will never reach our political objectives through legislation if we don't empathize with the right and work toward building knowledge and understanding. And I must reevaluate my positions constantly. How can I do this if I do not expose myself directly to the *feeling* of those in opposition? Reading only does so much. I must be *in* the experience to truly comprehend thought processes. I firmly believe empathizing with those of differing viewpoints brings us closer together. There can be no emancipation if we do not empathize with those holding different views.

There are examples of adult educators moving in the right direction, though, and there are ways in which I can apply these immediately. In Phoenix, Arizona, for example, students in one English class are engaging in “an inventive data-driven genre—the *critical incident*” which is meant to call students “from different social, cultural and economic positions into productive dialogue to discover and deliberate issues of shared concern” (Clifton & Sigoloff, 2013, p. 74). This is a simple, common-sense approach to increasing empathetic understanding between individuals with differing views, yet I have never attempted such an undertaking. I could easily collaborate with other organizations and create an event which is meant as a sharing session between opposite-spectrum groups. Turning Points U.S.A (conservative youth group) and Young Democratic Socialists of America could have a meeting to discuss ideology. Not a debate, but a conversation amongst a large group of people aimed at whole-person understanding. Are there common grounds to stand on together? The answer is likely, though we’ve never taken the time to find out.

Peter Hussey has brought Freirean liberatory education into community theater. He uses the stage to explore meaning, act reflectively, examine emotion, and “generate models of being human” through dialogue and shared understanding. Often, “actors” are assigned to play roles with which they do not currently identify. The intention is by exploring the character, they gain understanding and form new knowledge structures. This then leads to dialogue which attempts to explore questions which go past personal reasons for why an individual is the way they are. It is not about independent experiences. Rather, the dialogue relates to structures, and it is the changing of these structures which leads to social change (Connolly & Hussey, 2013). On a personal level, I often overlook the artistry of activism. This does a disservice to many learners as modality in delivery matters. That is to say there is no one way to engage learners in a dialogic

process and by focusing on in-person settings, I likely prevent many from participating. This speaks to educator acting as oppressor.

Something else to keep in mind as we consider dialogue as a means of emancipatory learning within communities is learners are becoming more and more disconnected with current economic, political and social constructs. As Fitzsimons (2010) noted, “There is supporting evidence of paradigm shifts by some students towards a new reading of the world. These include a greater awareness of oppression based on gender and class, and a deeper analysis of the function of community interventions” (p. 63). So as learners are increasingly more aware of oppressive forces, our focus in adult education must shift from one of knowledge dissemination to one of dialogue. And this gets back to the beginning of this paper. The time is now to seize upon heightened levels of discontent in a time when information is rapidly exchanged. Dialogue is the means to ensure these discontented individuals are able to take their angst past merely venting online or holding those with opposing views in contempt. No amount of information-based education will accomplish the goal of getting learners into a position in which they test and revise their beliefs or engage in whole-person knowing. Engaging in emancipatory dialogue, redefining the relationship between educator and learner and working toward critical consciousness is how we get past confirmation bias, expose self-oppression and create a space in which the working class and low-income individuals take back those systems conspiring to keep them in place. Access

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