reClaiming Space & Dialogue in Adult Education

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ABSTRACT: This paper critiques current trends in adult education against a backdrop of practice that was once testimony to an educational model that extended beyond formal learning and a business and industry agenda. Adult educators are called upon to reclaim an identity as leaders, in support of a shift in perspective and practice, more aligned to addressing the long-term needs of societies. Reclaiming ‘space’ and engaging in meaningful ‘dialogue’ are identified as critical elements to bring about this shift.

Introduction

Universities have traditionally promoted a culture of knowledge acquisition, scholarship and community service. Academia was once valued for this focus and scholars were invited by government officials and policy makers to consult on program development directions and initiatives in order to share and transfer knowledge gained. Scott, Spencer and Thomas (1998) made reference to “adult educators being in the forefront of policy making and education formation in Canada,” (p. 13). This was also a time when “the ideals of values revolving around equity, democracy and social transformation guided adult students’ learning, research and actions and in turn, influenced the goals set by policy makers (Scott et al., 1998, p.125). The fulcrum has shifted significantly, however, in that “adult education has become just one among many offerings in the ‘cultural market’ of society, which also means that adult education is increasingly subjected to the pressures of competition, conditions of supply and demand, and commercialization” (Finger & Asún, 2001, p. 86). This has placed adult education “at a crossroads, in danger of being directed only by the demands for vocational training, credentialism and the general requirements to prepare [adult learners] to meet the needs of the global economy” (Scott, Spencer & Thomas, 1998, p. 13).

In this paper, currents trends in adult education are critiqued against a backdrop of practice once testimony to social reform and a lifelong learning philosophy that extended beyond a ‘work for pay’ worldview. Adult educators are called to reclaim a ‘space’ and ‘place’ as leaders in education and society and to mentor the development of beliefs and abilities in support of a significant shift in perspective and practice, informed through meaningful dialogue.

Looking Back

Welton (1998) referred to the critical importance of debate within the context of adult education and called educators and practitioners to draw from the wisdom and insight of historical figures who advocated for relationship building, community development and the greater good of society. This paper is not intended to be a historical exposé. It does, however, juxtapose a discourse that is individualized and competitive with one more closely aligned to “[an emancipatory and] politically inspired model of collective welfare” (Finger & Asún, 2001, p. 133). Exploring the works of a few key figures in adult education history will illuminate some tensions brought about by this polarity of discourse and practice.

A Few Pioneers in Adult Education

John Dewey, Eduard Lindeman, Paulo Freire and Phyllis Cunningham are renowned figures in the field of adult education. Their lifework continues to guide many practitioners and scholars today.

John Dewey (1859 -1952)

Dewey is considered to be the most monumental contributor to educational thinking in the 20th century. Smith (2004) stated that “Dewey’s philosophical pragmatism, concern with interaction, reflection and experience, and interest in community and democracy, were brought together to form a highly suggestive educative form” (1), one that extended ‘across’ curriculum traditions and ‘beyond’ education only associated with children. Within Dewey’s Pedagogic Creed was the belief that
all education proceeds by the participation of the individual in the social consciousness of the race. This process begins unconsciously almost at birth, and is continually shaping the individual’s powers, saturating his consciousness, forming his habits, training his ideas, and arousing his feelings and emotions. Through this unconscious education the individual gradually comes to share in the intellectual and moral resources which humanity has succeeded in getting together.

Dewey (1916) expressed grave concern and referred to the inclination of each generation to “educate its young so as to get along in the present [emphasis added] world instead of with a view to the proper end of education” (7: 5.5). Dewey meant, what was best for humanity beyond the societal needs within which this education was intended. Dewey (1916) cautioned against a narrow and self-serving educational approach when he said, “Parents educate their children so that they may get on; princes educate their subjects as instruments of their own purposes” (p.12, 2). Urging educators to adopt a broader lens and a pivotal leadership role in the direction of education, he posed the question, “Who [else] then should conduct education so that humanity may improve?” (p. 12, 5)

Eduard Lindeman (1885 -1953)

Lindeman, a colleague and friend of Dewey, shared “a common concern for social justice, a belief in the possibilities of education and human action, and a deep commitment to democracy” (Smith, 2004, p. 2). Recognized as the ‘founding father’ of North American adult education, Lindeman (1989) broke new ground in 1926 when he spoke of ‘a fresh hope’ and philosophy of learning that spanned the entire lifetime of humankind. This was a message of lifelong learning and like Dewey, one that emphasized the critical importance of educating beyond the immediate, the known and the tangible. To fully appreciate the profundity of Lindeman’s contribution to education, it is important to position his work within the shifting North American landscape in the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Smith, 2004). Advances in industry and technology, alongside ideological (political) and religious transitioning, elevated Lindeman’s organization of thought to progressive and futuristic (Smith, 2004, p. 3, 2). Most significant, was that Lindeman, consistent with Dewey and social activists of that time, identified ‘education’ as pivotal to social reform.

Paulo Freire (1921 -1997)

Paulo Freire, a renowned Brazilian educator, advocated for a liberation (emancipatory/critical) pedagogy that stressed the critical importance of the collective dimension of learning. Freire believed that it was through collectively learning “that people not only solve[d] problems, but, moreover, transfer[ed] their sociopolitical conditions” (Finger & Asún, 2001, p. 86). Freirean philosophy significantly differed from other schools of thought, however, in that Freire maintained that adult educators were not just facilitators, but “animator[s], committed to the cause of the people he or she works with. As such, the animator cannot be neutral – he or she [had] to take sides” (Finger & Asún, 2001, p. 86). Freire called adult educators to actively participate in the reforms that they advocated for.

Although Freirean philosophy continues to guide the praxis of many adult educators, Freire’s pedagogy is cited as having both strengths and weaknesses in that “suggestions for alternatives remain unspecific beyond acknowledging that they have to be political. The strength is that this is not a pedagogy that supports a one size fits strategy. A potential weakness, on the other hand, is “where liberation pedagogy can simply not be able to live up to people’s expectations” (Finger & Asún, 2001, p. 87).

Phyllis Cunningham (1927 – Present)

Building on Freire’s liberation philosophy, Cunningham’s past and present lifework is testimony to a deep concern for social and ethical responsibility. A pioneer adult educator who continues to plow new ground, Cunningham (1993) explained critical pedagogy as educational action which develops the ability of a group to critically reflect on their environment and to develop strategies to bring about democratic social change in that environment. Education is not about promoting the existing hegemony; education is about developing counter-hegemonic struggle. Education is not simply about attaining knowledge; education is about the politics of knowledge. (p. 5, 3)

Cunningham upheld education as the democratization of power relations versus a preservation of a status quo steeped in privilege and elitism. Calling adult educators to challenge the current construction of social reality,” we are urged to realize “official knowledge” as only a layer constructed by the privileged, designed to sustain the social structures that the privileged have come to rely on.
Summary

The contributions of Dewey, Lindeman, Freire and Cunningham continue to inform the lifework of many adult educators throughout the Americas and the world. Their commitment to lifelong learning and to the improvement of humanity by way of a critical consciousness through social action intended to benefit the greater good, is a commitment needing to be revisited and reclaimed by contemporary adult education practitioners and scholars.

Contemporary Adult Education

Adult education in the new millennium reflects a significantly different belief system from the philosophies espoused by Dewey, Lindeman, Freire and Cunningham. Escalating trends align adult education more closely to big business than to social reform.

"Adult education has become increasingly complicit with private industry and business. Through workplace literacy, business and industry utilize the adult education profession and government funds to develop their own educational enterprise worth, in the USA, 210 billion dollars annually. (Cunningham, 1993, p. 4)

Aligning contemporary adult education to an HRD (Human Resource Development) model, Cunningham cautioned program developers about the 'learning for earning' mentality that continued to drive the adult education agenda. This model maintains the profit-making status quo and steers adult learners further and further away from a truly educative experience.

A Shift in Paradigm and Praxis

What transpired to cause this shift from an educative ideology and praxis of social reform, to adult education as a business? Cunningham (1993) made reference to adult educators being commodified, "buying into an alienating practice, because we do not critique what we do" (p. 4). Rather than a practice guided by an ideology and long-term vision steeped in a rich history of critical consciousness, our practice has been "reduced to techniques [that ultimately] serve industry by delivering to them compliant workers trained to be efficient producers" (Cunningham, 1993, p.4). What marked the onset of this affliction of short-sightedness? When did the lens shift from a view to a better humanity, to a focus on sustaining the darker side of capitalism? According to Welton (1995), there is insight to be gained by exploring the changing landscape within the field of adult education itself.

Professionalizing Adult Education

Dating back to the 1950s, Welton (1995) identified a “tendency towards professionalization” within the field (p. 77). Referring to the earlier works of renowned adult educators, namely: Moses Coady; Eduard Lindeman; Richard Tawney; Cyril Houle and Coolie Verner, a movement supporting the professionalization of adult educator was fueled by the argument that “adult learners (increasingly referred to as ‘clients’), [needed] assurance [as to] the competence of those from whom they rely on for pedagogical guidance” (Welton, 1995, p. 77). In response to the rising expectations of adult learners, driven by the demands of business and industry, adult educators sought "greater job security and a more dependable income for practitioners" (Welton, 1995, p. 77).

This rationale contributed to cognitive dissonance, "a psychological phenomenon …the discomfort felt at a discrepancy between what you already know or believe, and new information or interpretation" (Atherton, 2005, 1). What was already known and believed was that critical theory was foundational to adult education praxis. The new information was that this foundation was being threatened by a dominant agenda that focused on the provision of human resource needs for industry and business. Perhaps adult educators began to question the reasonability of a vision of social reform for a better world. Were ‘we’ becoming increasingly concerned about economic trends and how a globalized agenda, driven by the need for power, productivity and profit by business and industry might ultimately reduce our ‘life work’ from a passionate and prized ideology and vocation, to a mere ‘job’? I suggest that many adult educators who once supported a social reform ideology, in hopes of co-creating a better world, anticipated being relegated to those same margins that sheltered the discarded, those that they had historically advocated so passionately for. Marginalization forces individuals out of the collective into an individualistic survival ‘way of being’. This shift significantly reduced the power and voice of adult educators as ‘community’.

Aligning adult education to a model of professionalization is a narrow and misguided praxis, in that “the professionalization tendency has failed to provide jobs, job security, and dependable incomes for adult educators” (Welton, 1995, p. 78). Also, a human resource development model of adult education program development and delivery has done little to address the long term needs of adult learners, of business and of industry. The skills and labour shortage evident throughout the Americas is testimony to the ineffectiveness of programs that solely address
the task-centered needs of adult learners. “Quick fix” programs are merely initiatives that address the surface (ergo, temporary) needs of industry; they do not provide for the kind of capacity building needed for long-term sustainability.

Trends and Tragedies

The USA is not the only country to tout education as big business. The ‘learning for earning and profit’ model has successfully penetrated Canadian educational institutions as well. Universities in Canada have become more heavily dependent upon industry for funding. Consequently, management and leadership models, more closely aligned to business and industry practices, have been adopted by universities in an attempt to successfully navigate the economic realities and agendas of a globalized world. This trend is also evident throughout Europe where fitting people into the market and the assimilation of a learning and knowledge society model has become the dominant frame of reference in adult education (Finger & Asún, 2001, p. 132).

There are those who continue to embrace an emancipatory adult education philosophy and worldview. The tragedy, however, is that within many university settings, these same individuals are now representative of a diminishing small group, rather than a faculty. Or, remaining faculties typically more closely resemble HRD training and development units, rather than communities of like-minded souls committed to critical discourse and collective social action. This poignant reference targets the root of the erosion that continues to plague today’s adult educators and programs.

In a period of cuts in public services, adult education is among the first activities to be outsourced or privatised. The lucrative portion is being handed over to the private sector, while the non-profitable portion is being ‘given’ to community organizations, self-help groups, solidarity movements, NGOs, and civil society more generally. As a result, the practice and discourse of an adult education with a social action agenda no longer have an institutional and financial basis. Consequently, community and social change adult education is no longer ‘visible’ either in graduate programmes (the field from where adult education graduate students came), or in research agendas. It is enough to compare the number of books published by adult education publishing houses on training with those on social action. And where adult educators for social action persist, they are now increasingly being instrumentalised to help solve the problems the state is no longer able or willing to address. (Finger and Asún, 2001 pp. 129-130).

Perhaps Finger and Asún’s reference to adult educators being called upon to solve problems that governments are unable or unwilling to address, is, in fact, a timely space created – one needing to be (re)occupied by practitioners and scholars. Would this not (re)position adult educators as leaders at the forefront of education policy and social reform? Is this not a space to be (re)claimed in order that the voice of social equity, democracy and social transformation ideals, the values that once guided the learning, research and action of adult learners, and in turn, the ideals and values of policy makers, be once again represented at the table? (Scott, Spencer & Thomas, 1998).

It is the voices and visionaries of the past that need to be revisited and reclaimed if educators hope to transform contemporary HRD adult education practices. Paramount is the need to act on a more inclusive and diverse philosophy that extends beyond individualism and the acquisition of a competitive advantage in business and industry. A proliferation of short-term fixes to address long-term needs lacks the foundation, theoretical framework and sustainable vision needed to co-create healthier and better functioning societies. Indeed, vocational preparation programs, aimed at providing adult learners with the skills required to secure employment, are necessary. When adult educators limit the scope of programs to an employment-focused, competency-based approach, however, we significantly restrict the vision and potential of these initiatives and even more critically, of the learners themselves.

Adult education deserves and demands a vision that extends beyond that which has been created within a vocational vortex. This individualistic and industry-driven approach fails to recognize that adult learners are in need of skills and abilities that extend beyond vocational preparation. This approach also negates the lifelong learning moments that comprise the learning journeys of all adult learners. Therefore, “learning along the way” (Bateson, 1994), is often not recognized as a valid and reputable form of knowledge acquisition. This has resulted in adult learners being perceived as deficient, empty vessels in need of supply (Kawailak, 2004).

A New Lens

The dominant skills training culture driving adult education today, one informed by whinging employers and reactive governments, is quantifiable and easily translated to dollars and cents. It is this currency that holds universities hostage to the delivery of programs that mainly serve to sustain a ‘profit and productivity’ status quo.

Quantification is a logical measure, explicitly designed to determine outcomes and assign productivity. A qualitative lens, however, considers the substance, the quality of what is being explored and evaluated. In adult education we excel in our ability to quantify. It is time to delve deep to explore the substance (or lack of) in contemporary program offerings and initiatives. An industrial development (single vision) lens is designed to quantify. A lens that qualifies,
one that explores depth and breadth, is multi-faceted; it comes with a diversity of filters. Adult education programs need to be developed and evaluated through a multi-faceted lens. Only in this way will the humanistic needs of adult learners and societies, needs that extend beyond securing employment and profit generation, be assigned equity of value, power, view and voice.

Reclaiming the voices of adult education pioneers is not synonymous with replicating past practice as we live in a very different world from Dewey, Lindeman and Freire. Cunningham (1993) would also attest to major societal and global shifts since her work began fifty plus years ago, as an adult educator. This is new ground we are taming and one that demands a more holistic approach to program development and delivery. A multi-faceted lens has acuity of focus, the potential to capture and connect knowledge generated from the past and insights gained in the present, with future considerations, as we anticipate the reality of a rapidly emerging global agenda. A lens of this magnitude has the potential to illuminate what Finger and Asún (2001) referred to as the “dead end into which [adult education] has maneuvered itself” (p. 4) due to the lack of critical discourse on a dominant industrial development worldview.

Intersections Illuminated

I suggest that adult educators need not perceive contemporary practice as a “dead end,” but rather, a major intersection, convoluted with both tensions and potential. If viewed through a multi-faceted lens, intersections can be illuminated into pathways of possibility that ultimately allow for a diversity of perspective and direction.

Intersections are not only points of crossing, but elements of space and time where viewing those coming from other directions warrants serious consideration. To power through a major intersection without consideration or peripheral vision is to run the risk of major collision and fatality. If one pulls to the side, however, to reflect and rethink the next leg of the journey and the routes that will assist in getting there, therein lays the possibility of participating in the co-creation of a common area established to contemplate new directions and the greater good. To share this common area with others is to invite significant learning, knowledge acquisition and knowledge transfer. Unfortunately, too many fatalities occur due to lack of foresight and intention to accommodate others who find themselves at that same crossroads. Consequently, those with the most aggressive and irresponsible tendencies and intentions continue to cause the most harm.

Space and Dialogue

Reconstructing relationships and new ways of being in the world requires space and time. Taylor (1991) maintained that individual identities were deeply impacted by “our dialogical relations with others” (p. 48) and that these identities were not worked out in isolation. Rather, they were negotiated with others “through dialogue, partly overt[ly], partly internalized” (p. 47).

Space is both internal and external and refers to more than place. Space is about welcoming and is inclusive of difference. Space provides room for dialogue and regards pauses as opportune times for reflection. Space is neither governed by time nor rigid agendas; it can, however, be dangerous or safe. ‘Dangerous’ refers to high risk, that which is lacking in trust and fraught with cultural boundaries. Safe space, although not free of tensions, highly regards all of its members and commits to an equality of voice. Where there is no equality of voice there is danger space, simply by virtue of its absence.

Dialogue is an age-old technology that has withstood the test of time. This is visible throughout human history; dialogue served as the bedrock of Indigenous cultures, Greek civilization and preliterate Europe (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998). Dialogue evolved and continues to be informed out of a spirit of inquiry, a respect for diversity and an extension of trust. Authentic and meaningful dialogue can only exist within safe space. Dialogue focuses on “our collective thinking process and the meanings that arise from it, [as we] share in the leadership responsibility for acting coherently towards the whole, [so that] we could transform our world together” (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998, p. 39). Dialogue is aimed at fostering shared meaning. In other words, dialogue is a form of narrative learning and its nature is to explore and to gain a deepened understanding of perspective and lived experiences of self and others. Bohm (1998) captured the essence of dialogue when he likened it to “a stream of meaning flowing among and through us and between us. This will make possible a flow of meaning out of which may emerge new understanding” (p. 6).

Dialogue provides opportunities for the co-creation of knowledge by inviting participants in a process of creativity, within safe space, to make new meaning of perspectives and experiences. This shared meaning becomes “the ‘glue’ or ‘cement’ that holds people and societies together” (Bohm, 1998, p. 6). Contrasting dialogue with discussion, Bohm (1998) maintained that “discussion really means to break things up…and emphasizes the idea of analysis” (pp. 6-7). According to Bohm, discussion, like a ping-pong match, becomes a battle of ideas with the intention of a winner and a loser. Dialogue speaks to wholeness and is about emptying space to allow for the co-creation of new knowledge and understanding. In essence, discussion has the potential to fragment and isolate; dialogue has the capacity to connect
and to make whole. In discussion or debate, a pre-formulated agenda establishes the boundaries and direction of participant involvement.

Dialogue creates pathways for discovery; it encourages lateral thinking, suspends judgment, and welcomes ambiguity. Through authentic trust and openness, there is a potential for perspective and relationship transformation. Suspending judgments and tightly held convictions promotes collective exploration of experience and perception, thus testing traditional definitions, beliefs and assumptions. At the heart of this creative process, is a freeing (ridding) of oneself from a sense of urgency and necessity (Kawalilak, 2004; Bohm, 1998).

Identity

I have chosen to leave to the last where, I maintain, it is ‘most important’ to begin. I refer to the critical importance of an individual commitment to the exploration of our own identity as adult educators and all that this implies.

Identity has many faces and draws from a multiplicity of experiences and perspectives. Two critical components in identity formation involve personal reflections and authentic engagement with others. ‘Others’ extend beyond the members of our immediate communities to include local leaders and global thinkers. Flecha (2000) maintained that “reflection is vital in order to understand fully the tasks we need to accomplish and urged adult educators to use our creativity in finding new solutions to the problems that arise” (p. 16). Capra (1988) spoke of the need for human community and referred to a network of conversations as that which has the potential to evolve out of this authentic connection.

Summary

This paper began with a snapshot of the critical role that adult educators once played in the policy making and formation of goals and objectives that informed educational praxis. Pioneer adult educators were recognized for their contributions to the formation of a social movement that advocated for a deep commitment to a lifelong learning agenda and to a critical consciousness intended to benefit the greater good. External forces, driven by a business and industry mindset, were identified as primary, contributing factors to the cognitive dissonance when adult educators attempted to adjust from an ideology and praxis of social reform, to adult education as a business.

At the heart of this discourse is an invitation to adult educators and policy makers to adopt a new lens, one that promotes a more thoughtful, purposeful, and qualitative approach to adult education program development and delivery. The way forward is to look back. By drawing from the wisdom embedded in the philosophies and praxis of adult educators who came before us and by committing to the practice of the age-old technology of dialogue, to make new meaning of this wisdom, is to reclaim a space within which to influence future directions in adult education. To continue to measure the utility of programs against current business and industry trends is indeed, a superficial response to long-term needs that deserve and demand the attention of societies. This lens fails to recognize the higher level of learning and knowledge acquisition required, if in the words of Finger and Asún (2001), adult educators hope to purposefully respond to the critical societal issues that governments are no longer able or willing to address. A heightened awareness is only the beginning, however. In fact, claiming awareness is but a smoke screen, if insights gained fail to be publicly demonstrated.

The action needed is a visible commitment, from adult educators and governments, to provide the time and space needed to engage in meaningful dialogue. Before the dialogue can emerge, however, we need to acquire needed skills as dialogue extends beneath and beyond conventional models of conversation and debate. There is a belief system and worldview that guides and supports the co-creation of authentic dialogue within and across cultures (Kawalilak, 2004; Bohm, 1996/98). If we fail to acquire these skills, we run the risk of ‘token talk’ (or shallow speak) and this will only serve to reinforce the status quo.

This shift requires a deep commitment to the provision of time and space; the Eurocentric world view is not one that handles these concepts well, however. Typically, in our private and work lives, time and space are commodities exploited for economic gain. We have learned to hastily fill space with the hope of increased profit margins within decreased time-frames. Too much time is deemed unproductive, subsequently – unprofitable. In our personal relationships, the existence of space is perceived as a flaw in need of repair. Time is something to be hurried and space is waiting to be filled. In light of the vigorous capitalism that informs current education agendas, it will require a significant paradigm shift to adopt and support the provision of time and space needed to inform meaningful dialogue. Privileged societies currently dominating the global agenda have adopted a ‘short term gain – no pain’ mentality; this does not support the multi-faceted, qualitative approach to adult education that is called forth in this paper.

Adult educators have a significant role to play in the reclaiming of space and dialogue in adult education. Paramount is the need to resist against ‘blindly’ racing forward out of a ‘panic-stricken’ sense of urgency and necessity (Bohm,
We need not contribute to more fatalities. Indeed, the critical issues that plague our societies and our world are in dire need of enriched perspectives and thoughtful, purposeful action. As adult educators, we hold out hope for a world that is kinder, more compassionate, inclusive, more democratic and encompassing of the humanistic needs of all those who are a part of it. We seek collaboration and shared leadership. Purposeful, reflective action that evolves out of meaningful dialogue is the only way forward. The paradox, however, is that we no longer have time to be in a hurry.

References


Dr. Kawailak’s research focuses on global contexts and international perspectives on adult education and lifelong learning; cross-cultural dialogue; co-creating safe and challenging learning communities; flexible learning; holistic adult education praxis; alternate knowledge acquisition traditions; spirituality in higher education and workplace
settings; organizational change; program design/development; leadership.

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