

Chapter 108

Participatory Learning in Formal Adult Education Contexts

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ABSTRACT

Formal courses in adult education are most often housed within schools or faculties that include other disciplines such as teacher education, psychology, or training and development. Adult educators teaching these courses may feel obligated to follow the procedures and practices of the institution as well as of the programs with which they are associated. This creates a set of paradoxes and conflicts that are rarely addressed. Adult educators working in formal contexts teach about critical pedagogy and democratic practices without engaging in those practices themselves. This article advocates a participatory learning model based on the historical foundations of adult education theory and practice. The authors explore teaching as a subversive activity, hegemony, critical pedagogy, and power relations. The authors then discuss implications for practice in formal contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Education is an inherently idealistic and enthusiastic profession. Despite economic, political and social disadvantages (such as low income, lack of recognition and appreciation, and risk of being a scapegoat whenever things go wrong), people still choose to become educators. They have passion, enthusiasm, and idealism and want to make an impact on others' lives through teaching and

learning. If asked if they remember their very first day of teaching, most educators, if not all, would tell a story similar to Shor's (1992, p. 1): "I was walking to the first day of my basic writing class. I had a black book bag on my shoulder, a lesson plan in hand, and butterflies in my stomach."

As they gain experience, most teachers engage in reflection on their practice. They realize that teaching and learning are not simply about knowing and lecturing on the subject matter. They wonder why students seem to be uninspired, unmotivated, and resistant to learn. They question

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themselves about the students who seem want the teacher to “just do the job” by filling the class time and leaving; students who want to be spoon fed; students whose joy of learning is gone and for whom learning has become a “necessary annoyance” (Lindeman, 1961). Facing these challenges usually leads the educators into a set of dilemmas and uneasy questions.

Education, particularly adult education, is about learning and teaching where all the social, economical, political, and psychological challenges are countered with love, hope, and knowledge. The key for countering these challenges, however, is collective action in which students and educator take an active role in all aspects of their journey of learning. Even though there are no “how to” types of prescription, there is an historical umbrella called participatory teaching and learning.

It is our intention in this paper to advocate a model of participatory learning for formal courses in adult education. Teaching critical pedagogy without engaging in those practices is contradictory and hypocritical. How can we teach ideology critique without critiquing the status quo (for example, lesson planning and grading policies) and engaging in some counter-hegemonic acts (participatory strategies)? When we do this, we are reinforcing the existing reality and feeding hegemony. We base the model of participatory learning on the historical foundations of adult education theory and practice. We discuss teaching as a subversive activity, hegemony, critical pedagogy, and power relations. We then explore implications for practice in formal contexts.

BACKGROUND

Even though some authors, such as Campbell and Burnaby (2001) and Shor (1992) claim that the origin of participatory education can be traced to Freirian popular education and its concepts began being used in the adult education literature

in the 1980s (Jurmo, 1987; Suave, 1987), we can find even earlier roots. The development of adult education has been commonly linked to teaching and learning practices in which participatory methods were central. For example, Merriam and Brocket (2007) link the development of adult education as a field of study to social movements in which participatory methods were commonly used. In *The Meaning of Adult Education*, Lindeman (1926) emphasizes the crucial role of adults’ participation in the learning process. Lindeman claims that adults base their learning on materials and problems that are derived from their own experience, which also helps adults to develop a form of group motives and qualities. He further claims that this participatory feature of adult education distinguishes it from other forms of education. Social movements in Canada and the Highlander Folk School in the US support the roots of participatory education in adult education.

MacKeracher (2009) explores and describes four Canadian social movements: Frontier College, the Women’s Institute, the Antigonish Movement, and the United Farmers of Canada. Participatory teaching and learning were central in these movements. For example, Frontier College, an alternative to higher education, sponsored a literacy program that provided Bible studies, literacy training, educational discussions, and other activities to workers after their working hours. Even though this program used traditional methods at the beginning, it was transformed into participatory education when laborer-teachers (volunteer university students hired as laborers) started working beside their worker students. Laborer-teachers realized that when workers’ needs were a focus, better learning occurred, and the workers related the learning materials to their experience and problems. In the labor camp, these laborer-teachers authentically managed to establish an educator-student relationship where both laborer-teachers and workers learned from each other (Campbell & Burnaby, 2001).

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