Chapter 1

A Critical Theory Perspective on Program Development

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ABSTRACT

The dominant modes of program planning in the field of adult education are drawn from three intellectual traditions: humanistic psychology, progressivism, and behaviorism. This chapter proposes a model of program planning drawn from a different intellectual framework, the tradition of European critical social theory. Articulated by the Frankfurt School of Social Theory, a critical perspective emphasizes the role of adult education programming in fostering social movements for democratic social change. The chapter specifies the organizing principles and specific goals of a critical theory approach to program development and poses a number of questions that can be asked to determine the success of such an initiative.

INTRODUCTION

The two program development models at the center of this book, and the teaching practices that flow from them, both nest in well-defined philosophical schools. In the 1980's and 1990's Elias and Merriam (2004) elaborated this nesting. Elements of Andragogy were placed partly in humanistic psychology, and partly in progressive education, whilst Tyler's model was in the behaviorist school. In this chapter our objective is to conduct an analysis of pedagogy and andragogy drawing on a very different philosophical base, that of Frankfurt School critical theory. We will begin by laying out the basic tenets of a critical theory perspective, and then we will explore connections and contradictions between that perspective and the andragogical model of program development. Finally, we will outline what a critical theory approach to curriculum and program development might look like.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Theory

Critical theory has as its starting point the illumination and resolution of a difficult conundrum. How is it that the majority of people who are limited and constrained by a grossly iniquitous society come to accept this state of affairs as not only normal,

but actually desirable? Its central hypothesis is that dominant ideology is organized to convince people this is an acceptable state of affairs and that people learn this ideology throughout their lives. As a body of work then, critical theory is grounded in three core assumptions regarding the way the world is organized; (1) that apparently open, western democracies are actually highly unequal societies in which economic inequity, racism and class discrimination are empirical realities, (2) that the way this state of affairs is reproduced as seeming to be normal, natural and inevitable (thereby heading off potential challenges to the system) is through the dissemination of dominant ideology, and (3) that critical theory attempts to understand this state of affairs as a prelude to changing it.

Dominant ideology comprises the set of broadly accepted beliefs and practices that frame how people make sense of their experiences and live their lives. When it works effectively it ensures that an unequal, racist and sexist society is able to reproduce itself with minimal opposition. Its chief function is to convince people that the world is organized the way it is for the best of all reasons and that society works in the best interests of all. Critical theory regards dominant ideology as inherently manipulative and duplicitous. From the perspective of critical theory, a critical adult is one who can discern how the ethic of capitalism, and the logic of bureaucratic rationality, push people into ways of living that perpetuate economic, racial and gender oppression. Additionally, and crucially, critical theory views a critical adult as one who takes action to create more democratic, collectivist, economic and social forms. Some in the tradition (for example, Cornel West) link social change to democratic socialism, others (for example, Erich Fromm) to socialist humanism.

Critical theory is usually not written in terms immediately recognizable to those of us primarily interested in adult learning. Yet, an analysis of adult learning is usually implicit in its propositions, particularly in that strand of theorizing (initiated by Mezirow, 1981) that draws its inspiration from Jurgen Habermas (Welton, 1991). Subsumed within the general desire of critical theory to understand and then challenge the continuous reproduction of social, political and economic domination are a number of related concerns. One of these is to investigate how dominant ideologies educate people to believe certain ways of organizing society are in their own best interests when the opposite is true. Another is to illuminate how the spirit of capitalism, and of technical and bureaucratic rationality, enters into and distorts everyday relationships; what Habermas calls the colonolization of the lifeworld by the system (Welton, 1995). A third (and this is particularly important to a theory of adult learning) is to understand how people learn to identify and then oppose the ideological forces and social processes that oppress them.

A theory of adult learning originating in these general concerns of critical theory would attempt to answer a series of more specific questions focused on the way people learn to awaken and then act on their human agency. These questions would ask how people learn to challenge beliefs and structures that serve the interests of the few against the well being of the many, and how they then learn to build structures, systems and processes that are co-operative and collective, rather than individual and competitive; in other words, how they learn to build democratic socialism.

Understood this way a critical theory of adult learning is clearly a theory of social and political learning. It studies the systems and forces that shape adults' lives and oppose adults' attempts to challenge ideology, recognize hegemony, unmask power, defend the lifeworld, and develop agency. Such a theory must recognize its explicitly political character. It must focus consistently on political matters such as the way formal learning is structured and limited by the unequal exercise of power. It must not shy away from connecting adult learning efforts to the creation of political forms, particularly the extension of economic democracy across barriers of race, class and gender.

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