Chapter 16
A Critical Theory Approach to Program Planning

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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

In this chapter our objective is to conduct an analysis of an approach to program development grounded in the Frankfurt School critical theory. We will begin by laying out the basic tenets of a critical theory perspective, and then elaborate 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 - the prevailing explanations that explain why the world is the way that it is - con-

vinces people that structural and permanent inequality is an acceptable state of affairs. People learn this ideology throughout their lives from a variety of sources. Some are what Althusser (1969, 1971) calls repressive state apparatuses; that is, systems of authoritarian control such as para-military rule, police control and the prison system. But more effective are the ideological state apparatuses such as schools, the church and community associations. Ideology is the water in which we swim, the air in which we breathe, a reality that surrounds us without us ever being aware of its existence. We internalize ways of rationalizing injustice and institutional cruelty as the normal workings of the world.

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 person 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 person as one who takes action to create more democratic, collectivist, economic and social forms. Some in the tradition link social change to democratic socialism, others to socialist humanism.

Critical theory is usually not written in terms immediately recognizable to those of us primarily interested in learning. Yet, an analysis of learning is usually implicit in its propositions, particularly in that strand of theorizing that draws its inspiration from Jurgen Habermas (1987). 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 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 (1987). A third (and this is particularly important to educators) is to understand how people learn to identify and then oppose the ideological forces and social processes that oppress them.

A theory of 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 wellbeing 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 critical theory is clearly a theory of social and political learning. It studies the systems and forces that shape people's lives and oppose their attempts to challenge ideology, recognize hegemony, unmask power, defend the lifeworld, and develop agency. Such a theory acknowledges its explicitly political character and its focus on the way formal learning is structured and limited by the unequal exercise of power. It does not shy away from connecting learning efforts to the creation of political forms, particularly the extension of economic democracy across barriers of race, class and gender. It understands education as a political process in which certain interests and agendas are always pursued at the expense of others, in which curriculum inevitably promotes some content as 'better' than some other, and in which evaluation is an exercise of the power by some to judge the efforts of others. Critical theory springs from the desire to extend democratic socialist values and processes, to create a world in

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