

Chapter 62

From Social Learning to Norm Validation: Revitalizing the Emancipatory Aspirations of Adult Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter asserts that the emergent ontology of critical realism especially as mobilized by sociologist Dave Elder-Vass in his discussion of norm circles provides a powerful theoretical basis for supporting the emancipatory aspirations of critical adult education. According to Michael Welton, because of its capacity to support social learning, critical adult education has a pivotal role to play in human emancipation. Drawing on Jürgen Habermas’s critical theory of communicative action, Michael Welton argues that critical adult education’s deepest contemporary purpose is to foster social learning that can enable people to resist the destructive colonization of lifeworld contexts. This chapter argues that, while Habermas provides important insight into the normative foundations of critical adult education, his theory of communicative action cannot alone illuminate the ways human learning shapes and is shaped by lifeworld contexts. Elder-Vass’s exploration of norm-circles helps identify weaknesses in the concept of “social learning” and identify how, in addition to supporting individual learning, emancipatory adult educators can also support the distinctive emergent power of norm-circles to form and enforce epistemic, discursive, ethical, and practical norms.

INTRODUCTION

During the mid-1990s, Michael Welton (1995) drew on Jürgen Habermas to offer a radical critique of broadly influential conceptions of adult education. He argued that the “andragogical consensus” that prevailed in the field at the time depicted adult education as an assemblage of professional practices whose purpose was to help individuals learn to adapt to the shifting contingencies and challenges of

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-8598-6.ch062

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modern life (p. 128). Welton contended that, untroubled by any critical theory of social domination, this depiction of adult education ended up serving the intrusive interests of a burgeoning, destructive, and non-normative system much more than it did the people it purportedly aimed to help. Drawing on Habermas, Welton offered an alternative purpose for the field. Adult education, he contended, is an immensely important endeavor because of its potential to foster *social learning* that can support increasingly healthy, democratic lifeworld institutions capable of curtailing the destructive excesses of contemporary society (p. 155). Instead of helping individuals accommodate themselves to the instrumental imperatives of modernity, adult education should realize its full potential as an emancipatory force – that is, to use Welton’s Habermasian phrase, it should be a field of social practice “in defense of the lifeworld” (1995, p. 4)

Twenty years later, there seems to be very little overall consensus about what adult education is or what its purposes should be, let alone anything like the “andragogical consensus.” Certainly, as is so often lamented, much of what counts as adult education remains dominated by view of the field as a collection of professional practices for fostering individual learning, most often, to enhance prospects for ‘labour market attachment’ (to use an old Thatcherite phrase). But this is not all there is. Adult education, especially as it is promoted in much academic discourse, is openly characterized as an emancipatory practice that aims to seek out the ways power relations (especially the cultural power relations such as sexism, racism, homophobia, ethnocentrism, classism) distorts social learning processes with pernicious, negative effects.

I suspect (actually, in talking to him, I pretty much know) that, in Welton’s view, the current emancipatory talk of many academic adult educators fails to amount to an especially substantial shift in the field. Welton’s burning vision of adult education as a *pivotal* contributor to emancipation has certainly not come to fruition. Nor does it seem likely to. Instead, perhaps as a prototypical instance of “repressive tolerance,” critical adult education exists as a rather fragile bubble afloat on a foamy eddy of the academy with little, let alone pivotal, emancipatory social effect (Brookfield, 2005).

What is going on, here? Well, of the multiple and interacting forces shaping the field of adult education, Welton might contend that the critical social learning that adult educators themselves needed to engage in did not come to pass. Significantly, at the very juncture when critical theory might have helped adult educators clarify and commit to an emancipatory normative foundation for the field, a strong relativistic postmodernism called all foundation building into question. Welton’s advocacy of Habermas’s critical theory fell on hard times. Despite his belief that Habermas’s formulations were deeply important to the field (actually, Welton and I shared – and to a great extent continue to share – that belief), the discursive tide had changed. The choppy, inchoate seas of postmodernism ruffled the waters, and, suddenly, Welton wasn’t surfing anymore.

I know Welton struggled with what had happened and, I think, because of his in-depth understanding of Habermas and his wonder at the complexity, subtlety, depth, and richness of Habermas’s formulations, Welton never really believed that the theory of communicative action itself might be faulted. His belief in Habermas became even more deep-seated when Habermas (1990; 1991), himself, began to respond to the criticisms of postmodernists. Far in advance of most other critics, for example, Habermas (1990) observed that the post-Kantian relativism and strong social constructivism of many postmodernists deprived them of any solid basis for their accusations (relativism for the goose is relativism for the gander)! Armed with Habermas’s critique of the postmodernists (whom Habermas accused, in fact, of ending up unwittingly in league with neo-conservatives and whom Welton, himself, had great suspicions), Welton

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