

Chapter 73

By Means of Critical Theory: Informed Emancipatory Education – An Essay on Realities and Possibilities

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ABSTRACT

So-termed non-traditional adult students have become a key target for marketing efforts in higher education, and non-conventional, accelerated paths to university-issued degrees are the lure du jour in the business of selling education programs. A key ethical challenge in our profession remains how we align the education of adults according to the higher education institutions' mission statements to the education adults seek and actually receive. This chapter calls for considering the realities and possibilities of socially responsible educating when institutions are accountable to myriad stakeholders to peer at this issue through the lens of emancipatory education informed by tenets of critical theory. The argument hopes to engage the readers in problem-posing so that cross-sector, collaboratively designed education options can be considered that are contextual rather than prescriptive in nature and which align to the indigenous needs of teachers, learners, institutions, and communities.

INTRODUCTION

“We cannot solve our problems with the same level of thinking that created them” ~ Albert Einstein

Toward Problem-Posing

What is the purpose of education for adults? This simple question elicits diverse answers. Consider for a moment the variety of underlying assumptions and the concomitant considerations that are at the root of pondering the question when we ask different stakeholders about the purpose of educating adults. Drilling deeper, we may further ask: Toward what end do adult educators facilitate learning? Who determines the kind of transformation education programs are to achieve for adult learners? Whose reality are we

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reproducing with adult education programs? Whose reality are we affecting and how? The issue at hand in our field is that the power over the *why, what, and the how* of teaching is unilaterally maintained by those institutions, who sell their education products; namely education programs for which they award a coupon that declares one an educated adult. How did we arrive at this?

CRITICAL QUESTIONING OF ASSUMPTIONS AND CONVENTIONS: STARTING THE DISCOURSE

Power and the Producers and Disseminators of Knowledge

Institutions of education have a long tradition of holding the mandate, and with that the power, to educate adults. According to Fischer, formalized schooling originated in 3600 BC “when writing systems were developed in ancient civilizations around the world” (2004, p. 36). The immediate forerunners of contemporary institutions of higher education in the USA date back to the 6th Century. Based on values of the Roman Catholic Church (Riché & Contreni, 1978), the influence of the scholastic movements of the church on academic structures was further influenced by monasticism. This broadened university structures in which art, music, sculpting, and architecture were taught (Begley & Koterski, 2005), in turn reaching a wider class of people now. Universities in North America’s colonial times were modeled after the structure of these cathedral schools of the Middle Ages.

In their designs and approaches, not much has changed about Universities’ since those days as the “rather insulated and isolated North American academicians have remained steeped in brick-and-mortar, we-build-it-they-come approaches” (Strohschen, 2015x, p. 81). As such, the business of educating adults generally is built upon two social constructs:

1. the institution’s vision, goals, and plans about designing, developing, and implementing education programs, or the *why, what, and how* of the curricula, and
2. the values of the sources that produce the knowledge for the content, design, and delivery of education programs.

Considerations for the design and delivery do not readily include visions, goals, plans, and values of stakeholders other than the providers of education programs, and seldom is there space for collecting data to assess and grasp the reality of current and potential participants in this education business; including a vast cross-section of ‘participants’ such as students, teachers, vendors, employers, funders, advocates, community leaders, and more. Simply put, the chorus of voices of the very participants in this education business is not included. Yet, to arrive at clarity of relevant and meaningful education programs, value clarifications (or the *why* we teach); the expressed needs of adult students, assessed pre-design of education programs (or the *what* of content we teach) and the preferred strategies, methods, and techniques of teaching ought to be ascertained from the adult learners and the ‘teachers’ and the institutions (or the *how* we teach, or for that matter, *who* teaches). Instead, stakeholders in the education game are left on the sidelines of a field, one that is actually populated with a broad diversity of potential players of cross-sector dimensions, all lined up on a wide spectrum of interconnected interests, needs, and resources, and most importantly, ready to play a win-win game.

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