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Fiction Writing and Learning for Critical Citizenship: Exploring the Potential of Reading and Writing Fiction to Foster Democratic Learning Opportunities

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Abstract: Drawing upon the results of a Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) funded research study, this paper examines connections between lifelong learning, citizenship and fiction writing. Using critical and feminist theoretical perspectives, the paper explores how fiction writing can provide opportunities for adult learning and can address concerns around diversity and inclusion when exploring issues around citizenship.

Challenging the neoliberal conception that the main focus of adult education should focus primarily on values and objectives determined by the marketplace, this paper discusses a research study that uses a critical feminist approach to examining linkages between lifelong learning, citizenship, and fiction writing. The importance of lifelong learning to create a more engaged, active, and critically reflective citizenry is explored by considering educational opportunities linked with fiction writing. It begins with a discussion of the current context shaping lifelong learning discourses, overviews the methodology of the study, summarizes some of the findings and analyses, and concludes with practical strategies that adult educators might consider implementing in their own teaching practices.

Context

Ideally, the concept of lifelong learning suggests that learning occurs across the lifespan in a multitude of contexts, enriching the lives of learners and enabling them to participate actively as engaged citizens within democratic societies. Neoliberal values that emphasize individualism, competition, and a laissez-faire approach to education (Olssen & Peters, 2007) threaten to appropriate the concept of lifelong learning under an economic agenda that dismisses the significance of learning to foster the capacity for learners to become critical citizens. In this context, Giroux (2007) states, “the language of market fundamentalism and the emerging corporate university radically alter the vocabulary available for appraising the meaning of citizenship, agency, and civic virtue” (p. 104). The more critical language of adult education driven by a strong sense of social purpose is obscured by market driven notions of students as consumers, research as deliverables and universities as brands. Within a neoliberal context, individuals are held responsible for their own success, with the expectation that they need to

make wise “choices” around their learning trajectories. Social, structural, cultural, and historical factors that impact upon the decisions that individuals might make and the opportunities that they realistically have access to are frequently ignored or dismissed.

Seddon (2004) notes that traditional means of adults learning about becoming active and engaged citizens has been through their participation in unions, political parties and within civic associations. Hyslop-Magison and Thayer (2009) argue that to teach about democracy requires using a critical theoretical framework to challenge the values of neoliberalism as learners explore alternative perspectives to become more actively engaged as citizens.

A challenge for many adult educators committed to taking up democratic issues is to think about how learning opportunities in formal, informal, and nonformal contexts can be fostered to have learners develop as critical and engaged citizens. Martin (2003) and Guo (2006) discuss the importance of adult learning experiences to foster democratic capacities amongst learners. Feminists such as Butterwick (2003), Clover (2005), and Roy (2004) note rich learning opportunities within the arts for women to engage in critical learning related to citizenship. Although a couple of adult educators examine connections between adult education and popular media (Tisdell, 2007; Jarvis, 2005) and others such as O’Rourke (2005) look at opportunities for adult learning around fiction writing, there has been little research conducted around how notions of citizenship may be connected to reading and writing fiction. We believe that there may be benefits in exploring how fiction writing can support learning connected to developing the capacities to become informed and critical citizens.

Methodology

Using a qualitative approach, this Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) funded study is designed to provide insights into the learning pathways of Canadian fiction writers through life history interviews with authors from across the country. Although they may also do other kinds of writing (ie. poetry), the authors included in this study have all been involved in writing fiction as either literary authors, crime fiction writers, or as authors of children/young adult literature.

The narratives of these writers are used to consider some of the ways in which authors learn their craft. An extensive literature review, including analysis of related policy documents, is also included as a part of the study. Additional interviews with “key informants” in the education, publishing, and policy sector explore how fiction writing is supported through the educational, government and public sector, and raises concerns about how fiction writing can be connected to citizenship and lifelong learning. From these various standpoints, insights into the supports and barriers that shape the climate for learners with regards to fiction writing may be assessed.

Findings and Analysis

Learning to write fiction may be a formal or informal process that may be enhanced by programs where other writers mentor or “workshop” writing projects with participants. One key informant from a well established writing program noted “*It’s a minority who reads, it’s a minority that publishes*” suggesting that fiction writing is frequently an activity for the cultural and economic elite. The potential to use fiction writing to foster learning amongst the broader population exists, however, as can be seen in the comments from a participant in a different

program that provides mentorship around the arts and target minority youth: *“If kids can come together as people first beyond the parameters [of religious or racial difference] and narrative allows you into somebody in a way nothing else does...when you read a book...there’s themes that come out of the stories...like the struggle with identity...being Gay or Black.”* Given, as Kamul (2008) notes, Canada has over two hundred ethnic groups, providing opportunities to discuss difference and learn from one another in positive, collaborative ways, such as through writing fiction, may be a valuable strategy for lifelong learning around citizenship.

Canadian fiction benefits from the increasing diversity of contemporary writers. As literary writer Rosemary Nixon comments, *“When I lived in Zaire in the Democratic Republic of Congo,...witchcraft is a part of the world. So they think it's perfectly normal if someone turned into a hippo and bit a person in half and turned back to human form. If there are writers that come out of that tradition, they're going to be writing in a different way than Canadians did in the past with sharp, harsh realism. So I think we've learned from many of these other writers who bring their own identities and their own way of looking at the world. I think it's really opened the form of writing, the structure of writing, how you can put together a story.”* Fiction provides a venue for gaining insight into cultural diversity.

In addition to exploring issues around cultural diversity, through fiction, readers and writers can also explore the different sense of “place” that exists in terms of geographical diversity. The sense of space that exists within parts of Canada is very different from many other parts of the world. Crime fiction writer Jessica Simon talks about her own writing in which she says *“the landscape plays a huge role in my books. There’s almost half a million square kilometres of Yukon and 35,000 people living there.”* Within her books she also notes the culturally diverse population, including the issues with First Nations people who are, as she notes on her website, “recovering from the residential schools”.

Many important social issues are explored within the realm of fiction. Adult educators in community-based contexts as well as educators in schools and universities can draw upon fiction as a way to enhance the capacity of learners to think critically about their world. Through fiction one can take up difficult issues without necessarily drawing upon personal experience. Learners can discuss concerns related to particular characters and why the author might have developed the story in a particular way. For example, crime fiction author Giles Blunt discusses how his work in community services with youth influenced his writing: *“Because of the various things that have happened or not happened to them they were so messed up emotionally that to me, it was amazing that they were still breathing let alone going to school, holding a job – impossible...I did a book called *By The Time You Read This* which deals with sexual abuse and depression and the link between the two. They were very much in my mind... the kids that I worked with.”* Many individuals who have been through harrowing experiences such as abuse find themselves on the margins of society, not fully engaged as citizens or learners, because they have been so damaged by their life experiences. Through fiction learners can gain insights into some of the barriers that hinder the capacity of individuals to learn or participate actively in the broader society. Using a critical framework, they can challenge a neoliberal discourse of individualized responsibility, in which lifelong learning as Ian Martin (2003) describes, “becomes, in effect, a means of depoliticizing the debates about the politics of citizenship, systematically obscuring crucial asymmetries of power, and masking the managerial role of the state as orchestrator of the new consensus” (p. 576).

Fiction provides opportunities to develop capacities for democratic engagement. In order to do so, however, Lefebvre (2008) notes the importance of students learning critical reflection

and the ability to connect individual problems to broader social structural issues as they read text. Feminist theorist Dorothy Smith (2005) uses institutional ethnography as a means for learners to gain insights into how institutions and policies are constructed and enacted in ways that shape our daily lives as citizens and as learners. Interestingly, Smith discusses “becoming the text’s agent as the reader takes on the responses it sets up” (p. 109). Using the example of reading a mystery novel by Val McDermid (2002), Smith uses the term “secret” which then “operates as a set of instructions for finding these items that can be fitted to the concept” while reading the text to select relevant information, or to follow the clues (p. 109).

Fiction writing also serves to increase how language shapes our conceptualizations of the world. For example, Frank Davey – writer, poet, and critic – when asked the meaning of the term “culturally productive,” states in an interview by Jirgins (2010): “If a writer can change or enlarge how language can be used she is changing how the world can be imagined or ‘seen.’ That change could be in a general sense positive in that it had, indirectly at least, contributed to an expansion of the proportion of humanity that had access to justice and self-fulfillment. I call that ‘productive’ – in contrast to other possibilities such as ‘destructive,’ ‘obstructive,’ or ‘butt-covering’” (p. 4). He sees a strong connection between language, future vision, and justice, and more importantly, how the writer is instrumental in shaping reality through words. Davey argues for democratic practices that emerge from using language creatively. In his most recent project, he overlays historical postcards from Canada, Iraq, and Afghanistan with political rhetoric (amongst other discourses) taken out of context. Commenting on his own creative work to Jirgins, Davey states, “If you alter the context of words, you alter what they mean, and you reveal that the original ‘meaning’ was not as stable as it once appeared, or that it had dimensions other than what it first may have appeared to have. Oppressive politics is often conducted through declarations of certainty – that Sunnis have the correct path and Shias the wrong – or vice versa, that this ruined city is the ‘real’ Ur of the Chaldees, that there really are ‘weapons of mass destruction.’” (p. 10). Writers challenge perceptions of current political and economic events by exploring the use of language in creative mediums.

Once learners develop skills around critical reflection and textual analysis through critically reading fiction, they may develop a better capacity for critical textual analysis when reading policy documents, newspaper articles, or discussion papers, as a preparation for democratic debate. Similarly, they may find it beneficial to explore challenging issues through diverse perspectives when writing fiction and discussing their work with other learners.

Pedagogical Strategies

There are numerous practical pedagogical strategies that adult educators might use with learners to help them to deepen their understanding of citizenship that draw upon fiction reading and writing. In this next section, we outline a few of these for consideration.

Mail-o-gram

An exercise that might be adapted to an adult education context involves adopting a common strategy English teachers use as a pre-reading activity called a mail-o-gram. In the classes leading up to the reading of the fictional piece, the professor creates and then gives students each class a letter written in the voice of a specific character (without explaining why to build anticipation and suspense). Each student receives letters from only one character, although there may be several different characters’ letters handed out in the class. The letters present a

character's perspective in such a way as to persuade the reader to agree with his/her point of view. When students then start reading, they have already begun the process of thinking about bias and perspective in relation to other narrative events. Since discussions around citizenship need to consider how stakeholders may represent sometimes contradictory or convoluted viewpoints, this literary exercise works on skills for critically examining and teasing out how to interpret distinct discourse models and how to infer what is written between the lines.

Debatable Statements

Another pedagogical strategy involves the professor handing out a series of debatable statements such as "a person that strives hard can achieve any goal." These statements pertain to central issues in the fictional piece subsequently read by the class. The class then has the opportunity to think back to their initial conversation about these statements, now having read the literary narrative, and elaborate, revise, and problematize their initial opinions. The fictional writing serves as a tool to complicate notions of power relations, discursive practices, and limitations placed on the shaping of epistemologies.

Word Writing Exercise

Recalling the importance of Freire's understanding that words carry important political meanings, the educator could select a single word that might be taken up or understood in a variety of contexts, and ask students to do a free writing exercise where they are given fifteen minutes to write the beginning of a fictional story that uses this one conceptual word as its inspiration. For example, the word *greed* could be given, and then learners are told to make up a story and simply put the pen to the paper and write. If a person cannot think of anything to say they are to simply write something like "I really don't know why I am doing this exercise, it is hard to think of something..." Almost always, when a person does this, words will come and few students find themselves incapable of writing. In fact, most learners surprise themselves with what they come up with, and how quickly their imagination takes over. Students are then given the option to share their writing with others, and to discuss where the ideas came from and what they were thinking about as they were writing. This can often be a creative spark to a discussion that can then be connected to broader social, political and cultural issues.

Implications

Lifelong learning should support opportunities for learners to develop the ability to engage fully in society as critically engaged citizens. Adult educators concerned with challenging an individualistic and competitive neoliberal agenda to education, can consider the possibilities of fiction reading and writing as a means of promoting democratic learning opportunities. This may encourage a more holistic framework for developing the kind of critical literacy that citizens need to understand the issues facing their own society as well as broader global issues.

One of the unique aspects of Canada as a nation-state is that despite its small population, often overshadowed by the domineering presence of its American neighbour, it has numerous publishing houses and successful authors in a variety of different areas. This research study has consistently found that government funding for programs designed to assist writers in learning and perfecting their craft, can be beneficial in terms of providing not only mentorship and learning opportunities as they relate to the world of fiction writing and publication, but also the

space and time to write. At the same time, there are many challenges around how decisions about funding should be made, which authors should receive support, and in what ways publishing ventures should be supported.

In addition to supporting writers and publishers, however, it is also essential to consider how we can support formal, informal, and non-formal learning opportunities linked with fiction writing within the Canadian context. There are numerous creative programs that demonstrate the potential benefits of supporting fiction writing not just as an activity for the artistic elite, but also as a means of learning for citizens at all ages and stages in life. One of the key informants talked about the diverse range of programs developed over the years, noting that: "*the longer we are at a particular venue, the more sessions we do give, the more we get buy-in from the partner, the better the results are... We're trying to figure out how to get more resources because we can do better*". There are many important programs related to fiction writing that depend on funding and grants from government sources which are invaluable in promoting Canadian literature, but also benefit citizens interested in fiction writing, even if writing will never be a full-time career option for them.

The other way in which fiction writing and reading can be taken up is through a more holistic and interdisciplinary approach in which educators from diverse fields can consider how to incorporate activities or exercises that draw upon fiction writing and reading within the curriculum to promote critical literacies. By challenging a neoliberal perspective that attempts to delimit learning to targeted skills or demonstrated capacities, critical and feminist educators can argue for a broader conception of lifelong learning connected to citizenship, that requires the ability to articulate different positions, understand multiple viewpoints, and creatively explore linkages between individual circumstances and global concerns. Through exploring the complexity of the stories we tell, learners can gain insights into the factors that shape individual narratives, and the multiple variables that may impact on life and learning experiences. Rather than simplifying the learning process, we need to engage learners to think deeply and critically about important social, political, and cultural issues. In these ways, incorporating fiction writing and reading may foster the development of democratic capacities for adult learners in a wide range of contexts.

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