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Reclaiming the radical: using fiction to challenge the ‘facts’ of a neoliberal discourse in lifelong learning

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Introduction

Critical and feminist adult educators from around the globe such as Freire (2004, [1992]), Jackson (2003), Brookfield (2005), Hart (2005), Newman (2006), Welton (2005), & Martin (2004) have long argued that power permeates all educational contexts. Learning never happens in a neutral zone. Yet the radical voice is always struggling to be heard. Increasingly the impact of neoliberalism serves to silence the dissident voices of radical adult educators.

This paper overviews some of the shifts in adult education policies and practices over the last couple of decades to note how neoliberalism has increasingly shaped the emerging discourses around lifelong learning. These changes can be seen in the growing emphasis on learning as an individualized responsibility, the perception that policies around education must always be determined within a competitive framework, and the underlying assumption that the values that shape adult education should be intrinsically linked to the global marketplace. Using a critical feminist analysis that draws upon Habermasian theory, the paper argues that the impact of neoliberalism demonstrates the effectiveness of the ‘system’ in effecting a dominant worldview that is so all encompassing that the majority of the population accepts its tenets as a factual representation of reality.

Under the influence of a pervasive worldview that consistently reiterates a narrow, what Habermas (1987) would refer to as a technical-rational view of education, the needs of the marketplace are consistently prioritized. In this context, learning that focuses on means-end results such as ‘essential skills’ or competency-based approaches to education are given greater value. As a consequence, Ian Martin (2003: 573) argues that ‘critical, engaged, and open-ended adult education has almost disappeared’. This is a serious concern as emancipatory and dialogical approaches to lifelong learning are an important aspect of supporting the development of an active and engaged citizenry.

In order to reclaim the radical perspective that is an integral component of adult education within a social purpose tradition, there is a need to develop critical approaches to teaching and learning that challenge a neoliberal framework for lifelong learning. This paper draws upon a current three year Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) research study that explores connections between lifelong learning, citizenship, and the craft of writing fiction to explore how fiction writing can be used to challenge learners’ taken-for-granted

assumptions about the world. Educators working from a critical framework can use fiction to enable learners to explore their understandings of the world and others in it from alternative perspectives and frameworks, taking into account how power shapes personal and social experiences.

Neoliberalism and lifelong learning

Within the context of neoliberalism, lifelong learning is shaped by marketplace values that emphasize the importance of competition and personal choice.

Olssen (2006) points to the underlying assumptions around education linked to a neoliberal framework whereby 'lifelong learning is a market discourse that orientates education to the enterprise society where the learner becomes an entrepreneur of him/herself' (p. 223). Neoliberalism frames personal choices around learning as individual decisions around learning trajectories. From this perspective, social structural factors that delineate opportunities, responsibilities and barriers are screened out. A neoliberal framework devolves responsibilities for education onto the learner. Jackson (2003: 367) points out that despite the attractive rhetoric of lifelong learning and notions of a learning society, 'learning is clearly set in a discourse of individualism'. This emphasis on the individual frequently disadvantage women, particularly minority women and women from a working class background.

The competitive and market oriented discourse of lifelong learning in a neoliberal framework undermines the collective responsibility of a social purpose tradition historically connected to radical adult education. Olssen (2006: 219) draws upon Foucault's (1991) notion of governmentality to argue that in a neoliberal context, 'the economic covers all of society and society is theorized as a form of the economic. The task of government is to construct and universalize competition and invent market systems'. An educational system that is constructed to be responsive to the marketplace situates learners in a competitive position whereby individuals must assume responsibility for charting their own learning trajectories. This framework for lifelong learning diminishes the need for students to develop empathy for other learners, dismisses the value of critically assessing political and cultural structures that shape social contexts for learning, and undermines the rigor of in-depth theoretical and philosophical inquiry.

Critical feminist analysis

As the recent *Learning Through Life* NIACE report (Schuller and Watson, 2009) notes, the primary support for adult education policies and practices in recent years has been skewed towards addressing perceived needs of the marketplace. Critical and feminist educators have frequently challenged the narrowness of this approach towards learning.

The work of Jürgen Habermas has been drawn upon by many critical adult educators to explore emancipatory approaches towards lifelong learning. Habermas (1987: 56) discusses the concepts of *worldviews* that 'offer a potential grounding that can be used to justify a political order or the institutional framework of a society in general'. Within Western society the influence of marketplace in shaping our everyday contexts has become broadly accepted, so that this neoliberal value framework becomes a part of most people's worldview. In Habermasian terms, this is an example of how the *system* – the political-economic structures has invaded or

'colonised' the *lifeworld* – a place of everyday interaction within community and family.

Newman (1999: 158) explains that 'the system is used to denote a combination of the processes of exchange that go to make up the economy and the processes of the political and legal control that go to make up the state'. Habermas's thesis of the colonization of the lifeworld argues that over time the system has grown in size and gained strength, so that increasingly it has intruded upon the intersubjective realm of lifeworld where meaning used to be negotiated in more collaborative ways. The infusion of the language of the marketplace into everyday contexts demonstrates how pervasive the worldview of the system has become in shaping our taken-for-granted understanding of how our educational systems as well as the broader society should operate. Brookfield (2005: 237) explains that 'the market – the web of economic exchanges, price control mechanisms, cartel agreements, and patterns of consumption – impinges on our lives in ways that seem uncontrollable, beyond our influence'. Market values come to be perceived as an inevitable aspect of everyday considerations, regardless of context.

In some ways a critical Habermasian analysis is similar to Olssen's discussion of Foucault's concept of governmentality whereby we can see that the overarching effects of the marketplace are felt in all aspects of life, including our various learning contexts, regardless of how appropriate it is to have these sites shaped by these values. However, in Habermasian terms, this is an example of system imperatives encroaching upon the preserves of the lifeworld. The effects of this can be seen in the way the language of the marketplace infuses academe - so we come to view our students as customers or consumers, our educational programs as products to be delivered, and our research as outcomes and deliverables. The language is representative of how we actually come to view our reality as students and educators within a neoliberal context of lifelong learning.

Welton (2005: 136) notes that Habermas's (1984) theory of communicative action 'has important implications for critical educational practice'. It is through the capacity for developing communicative and dialogical discourses linked with our ability to reason and argue effectively that we can envision an alternative framework for lifelong learning. Critical educators challenge the language of the marketplace and the dominance of economic values within adult learning contexts. As Freire (2007 [1974]) argues, education should be developed as a practice of freedom, through which learners come to critically understand and assess the societies in which they live. It is only by being able to articulate initially a more sophisticated understanding of the social, political, and economic systems that govern our lives, that learners are able to then discuss and envision alternative frameworks for living and learning.

At the same time feminist educators (Gouthro, 2009; Jackson, 2003) also challenge the narrowness of a neoliberal framework for learning that fails to acknowledge the importance of learning connecting the homeplace, caring labour, and the learning needs of more marginalized people within society. A feminist lens draws attention to important learning that occurs outside of the marketplace. A gender analysis of lifelong learning experiences points to the ways in which patriarchy shapes educational discourses and is embedded in values linked with the marketplace that prioritize learning connected with profit over learning connected with life. Hart (2005:

69) explains that 'when students begin to see that women's work is economically quite beneficial to global capitalism and that it is therefore inseparable from the notion of class, racial, ethnic or cultural identity, they are ready to revisit their own lived experiences and investigate how these may fit into this larger system'. In this way, a critical feminist lens can encourage students to explore how their own biographies and stories, as well as the biographies and stories of others, are linked with larger social structural issues of power.

Fiction, citizenship, and lifelong learning

Our current research project looks at connections between lifelong learning, citizenship and the fiction writing in Canada. The study entails an examination of the policies and programs that currently support fiction writers and learning around fiction in Canada, interviews with 'key informants' in related publishing, educational and policy sectors, and life history interviews with Canadian authors who are published through traditional routes.

Wright and Sandlin (2009) argue the one of the under-researched areas in adult education is an examination of popular culture in connection to adult learning experiences. In this study we are interested in exploring Canadian fiction that includes not only CanLit – writing that is considered to be literary fiction – but also genre fiction, focusing in particular on crime fiction, and children/young adult fiction.

We are interested in exploring fiction writing in connection to the topic of citizenship, because as Fuller and Sedo (2006) note, drawing upon the work of Anderson (1991), it is through fiction we can imagine or envision our understanding of Canada as nation and our role within it as citizens. Canada is a geographically large nation with a diverse and dispersed population. Arguably, one of the factors that has shaped its unique sense of identity as a country is the development of its own body of fiction. It is through fiction that writers can create stories around different lives and alternative ways of viewing and understanding the world. Writers of different ages, from various geographical regions and cultural backgrounds all contribute to the diverse mosaic of Canadian fiction.

In their examination of how historical fiction can be used to encourage learners to critically reflect upon history as a field of study, den Hey and Fidyk (2007: 141) argue that people 'create stories to come to terms with what is otherwise unbearable, unspeakable, or unimaginable'. Fiction can be used creatively in pedagogical contexts to encourage learners to read and write about a wide range of experiences, sometimes taking up difficult subjects such as racism, homophobia or sexism. Through fiction there is potential, if educators use respectful, dialogical methods for teaching, to encourage the development of empathy, understanding, and imagination amongst their learners.

At the same time it is important to consider which stories will be shared or published, and how various policies and programmes can support or deter the advancement of Canadian fiction writers. Fuller and Sedo (2006) point out that other forms of media such as the Canada Reads program through the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation have an important impact in shaping which types of fiction are valued and supported. They note that while there is a tendency to perpetuate a 'blockbuster' phenomena created through the global publishing industry, whereby a few select texts are promoted to big audiences while others are sidelined, the opportunity to dialogically

explore Canadian fiction always opens up avenues for representation of alternative viewpoints.

The tensions around which types of Canadian fiction will be acknowledged and supported is indicative of the challenges of what Habermas would term 'system imperatives' impacting upon the lifeworld. In the globalised marketplace of the publishing world, profit margins determine which books and authors will be supported. In this context, few Canadian writers can make enough income from their work to survive.

The Arts have always been important within Canadian culture, despite criticisms of lack of sufficient government support, particularly after recent Conservative government cut-backs. There are also disagreements over how resources should be distributed, for example, with regards to whether funding should go directly to writers or whether it should be used for institutional kinds of supports. Currently within Canada there are numerous government programmes that support Canadian writers through grants to small publishing houses and competitions for cost-of-living grants for authors who want to dedicate time to writing fiction. There are also several grassroots organizations that have developed to support Canadian writers, such as the Nova Scotia Federation of Writers and Crime Writers of Canada. In addition, new programmes are emerging that are supported by various forms of government funding to encourage, for example, the mentorship of New Canadian [immigrant] writers in learning to write fiction. Through these measures, as well as policies and programmes linked with multiculturalism, a more diverse representation of stories are gradually being published.

Reflecting upon the challenges of teaching learners to write fiction, one of the authors we interviewed talked about how stories change depending upon 'who has the microphone'. Our understanding of issues around citizenship, for example, will be very different if we look at stories written from the viewpoint of a young male immigrating from Jamaica to Toronto, from an elderly woman living in a rural outport fishing community in Newfoundland, or from a successful Francophone businessman residing in Montreal. The story will also change if you tell it from the point of view of the mother of the Jamaican immigrant, the neighbour of the elderly woman, or the wife of the Francophone businessman.

This author also commented that fictional stories often take up issues around people's worries, which vary from place to place. There may not be a lot of things that bind us together within a nation-state, but in Canada one commonality is that everyone has to worry about is winter. Wherever you live in Canada you have to think about practical concerns such as having enough wood to burn in the fireplace, getting new skates for the children, or putting snowtires on your vehicle. Therefore, some of the issues we may take up as citizens include how we deal with living spread across vast geographical spaces and how we cope with a climate that poses particular challenges. In addition, we can consider how we develop a sense of identity around what it means to be Canadian given the historical issues of colonization and diaspora, as well as more modern concerns about migration and changing issues around human rights (ie. legalization of gay marriages). All of these concerns raise issues around diversity and inclusion, rights and responsibilities, that are important to consider as citizens. They are also the types of issues that shape our stories and the fiction that we read and write.

Reclaiming the radical

Critical educator Ian Martin (2003: 567) argues that 'we keep getting it all wrong because we talk about lifelong learning in educational rather than political terms'. To reclaim the radical vision for adult education, there is a need to challenge the dominant worldview endorsed by a neoliberal framework that articulates education as primarily an individual rather than social concern and that links the value of learning to an economic assessment. Using fiction writing to develop critical and dialogical opportunities to explore topics such as citizenship is one strategy for fostering more holistic and critical approaches to lifelong learning that exposes learners to alternative viewpoints and ways of understanding the world.

In challenging the narrowness of a worldview determined by system imperatives, critical educators foster democratic and dialogical approaches to learning, qualities that are imperative for the development of an active and engaged citizenry. Martin (2003: 577) states that Margaret Thatcher often argued that 'there is no alternative' as a way of eliminating dissent. Silencing debate undermines the radical potential for adult learning, thus undermining the processes of communicative learning that are an essential component of a deliberative democracy.

Fiction writing provides alternative visions of what it means to be a citizen (whether of Canada, the UK or elsewhere). Exploring the stories shared by other people is a way to gain a deeper understanding of other people's experiences, and if taught by critical educators, can be a way to make connections to theoretical debates around issues pertaining to social purpose. In challenging a neoliberal approach to lifelong learning, critical and feminist educators draw attention to the importance of understanding alternate viewpoints and engaging in communicative forms of learning. Radical educators encourage learners to take up important issues around topics such as citizenship and to challenge the narrowness of a worldview that asserts the dominance of marketplace values. As Martin (2003: 577) argues, the 'role of critical and progressive adult education must be to challenge this new common sense and be part of the process of fighting back and showing that there is *never* no alternative'.

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