Feature Article

Critical Dialogue Around the Social Justice and Cultural Dimensions of Globalization

Linda Ziegahn

> To me global economy means that I have to give to receive. It's just like the food chain; the grasshopper eats the ant, the fish eats the grasshopper, and we eat the fish. Our clothing, food, and a variety of other things come from this global economy.
>
> An adult learner in *Equipped for the Future* (Stein, 1995)

Globalization is a complex phenomenon that has many implications for the practice of adult education in the United States. It has been termed a "plastic" word, with meaning that shifts depending upon the interpreter (McKenzie, 2005; Pörksen, 1995). On one level, globalization reflects the reality of an increasingly multicultural population, due in part to the breaking down of trade barriers and immigration. As people from different backgrounds converge, they often find that the usual expectations around interpersonal, inter- and intra-group communication are no longer valid. The element of cultural difference—based on nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, profession, or other grouping that implies significant shared beliefs, values, and communication styles—adds both an opportunity for enriched interactions between and among individuals as well as more opportunities for misunderstanding and conflict.

A more complex view of globalization is provided by Holst (2006), who suggests that the compression of time and space characterizing the growing interconnectedness of the world are effects of globalization, rather than causes. The free market ramifications of globalization affect the cultural, economic, and social justice aspects of American life. As barriers are broken down and new ideas and trends move through the

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country, homogenization of identities and traditions also occurs. Perhaps the most significant change, increased wealth, a corollary of multinational capitalism, is more likely to be used for the advancement of individual gain than for the development of societal safety nets for the poor and disenfranchised (Fiallos, 2006; Goerne, 2006; Groener, 2006; Holst, 2006; McKenzie, 2005; Sen, 2000).

The role of adult education in a globalized environment distinguished by increased diversity and by economic and political imbalances becomes that of promoting material and cultural changes so that global society can focus on expansion of human freedoms (Sen, 2000). These include freedom from poverty and tyranny, scarcity of economic opportunities, systematic social deprivation, and abandonment of public services. Such a role echoes the radical tradition of adult education (Freire, 1970) and its emphasis on freedom from oppression. Sen also suggests that adult educators need to nurture "superior necessities" such as the cultivation of the intellect, spirit, kindness, and a commitment to support the cultural development of humanity. Implicit in this call for change is the necessity of dialogue that can illuminate the many layers of globalism, from political and economic restructuring at local and global levels to communication between different cultures.

Dialogue in adult education classrooms around globalism, often within the context of employment (Stein, 1995), is not only issue oriented. Learners also bring to dialogue differing cultural values. For example, new immigrants from Viet Nam may see work opportunities within the United States differently from long-time citizens, viewing salaried employment as benefiting entire communities rather than advancement primarily for the individual and his or her immediate family. Or, environmentalists may perceive forest conservation as a long-term obligation to future generations, in contrast to groups who are more concerned that the logging industry provides jobs for the current generation. In the southern U.S., many textile mills have closed down and moved to other countries, displacing American workers. Foreign auto industries have emerged: Hyundai and Mercedes in Alabama; Toyota in Georgia and Kentucky; BMW in South Carolina. The young, single women who typically work in the American auto industry have frequently found themselves at odds with Asian owners and managers who have less experience with women working in such environments. In all these situations, metaphorical borders need to be crossed in order for new meanings and perspectives to be forged across differing cultures,

languages, and experiences, as learners grapple with the complexities of multinationalism.

To sum up, there is a need for open spaces in which adult learners can talk *about* the paradoxes, misunderstandings, and conflicts that arise in the workplace and the larger community around global issues and talk *with* culturally different others who are now part of a multinational world. These two kinds of discussion within the context of adult education are complementary but different. In talking about global issues, critical dialogue serves the purpose of helping learners probe their underlying assumptions about the way the world works, and forge new perspectives on both personal and socio-political relationships (Freire, 1970; Mezirow, 1991; Taylor, 1998). In talking with people from different cultural backgrounds (based on class, race, gender, nationality, or other cultural dimensions), intercultural communication concepts help crystallize the specific value dimensions of cultural difference that can stymie effective communication between culturally different others (Hall, 1983; Hofstede, 1982; Kim, 1997).

Critical Dialogue in a Globalized Environment

Adult learners engage in critical dialogue in many settings; formal classrooms as well as the many nonformal education contexts that exist outside of "school." Dialogue is considered critical when learners actively question their instinctual responses to meaning-making in particular situations, instead of passively accepting taken-for-granted social realities (Bowers, 1984; Brookfield, 2000). The liberatory philosophy of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970; 1990) has strongly influenced critical dialogue:

> Dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world. Hence, dialogue cannot occur between those who want to name the world and those who do not wish this naming— between those who deny other men the right to speak their word and those whose right to speak has been denied them. Those who have been denied their primordial right to speak their word must first reclaim this right and prevent the continuation of this dehumanizing aggression (pp. 76-77).

In "problem-posing" education (Freire, 1970, p. 66), the teacher-student differentiation is blurred as both become critical investigators of a world

that is in process rather than static. Through the process of conscientization, all parties in situations of unequal power distribution reflect critically on the historical origins of oppressive realities with the goal of action in order to transform those realities and become more fully human. They do this through dialogue that is active, critical, and couched within a horizontal context of mutual trust and empathy (Freire, 1990).

Examples of dialogic approaches can be found within such movements as popular education and participatory action research, both influenced by Freire. Popular education provides an umbrella for movement-associated adult education, which has as goals emancipation, liberation, consciousness-raising, and empowerment of people and of communities (Olds, 2005). Dialogue within popular education starts from personal experience and moves to shared understanding, facilitated by methods for social analysis and confrontation of oppression. Acknowledging people's understanding of their own problems and a faith in their ability to learn what they need to know to solve these problems is central. Thus, the notion of voice—people telling their stories without fear—is critical, and is subsequently connected to ways in which individual experiences can be extended and further connected to plans for action.

Participatory action research (PAR) is another Freirean-inspired methodology in which people are viewed not merely as subjects of an objective research process, but as equal participants, bringing in different and equally valuable skills and knowledge (McKenzie, 2005). The techniques of PAR are many and creative—stories, socio-dramas, debates, songs, poetry—all aimed at creating "multi-layered and multi-centered dialogue" (McKenzie, p. 14), wherein cultural issues such as over-fishing or other environmental or social justice challenges are raised in order to spark discussion and reflection. The goal of PAR is to inspire participants with the knowledge and tools to engage powerful leaders in dialogue and to question political decisions. The PAR process shifts from community to community, depending on differing cultural norms around expression and dialogue and on negotiating who speaks for the community.

While less grounded in the radical tradition of adult education, transformational learning (Mezirow, 1975, 1991) echoes the ideas of Freire and others who call for problem-posing dialogue that better equips participants to interrogate hegemonic assumptions. Mezirow speaks of the disorienting dilemmas that occur when people find themselves in the midst of either internal or external crises as opportunities for learning, and for reconsideration of the taken-for-granted assumptions about the

world. He proposes certain necessary conditions for communicating meaning through rational discourse: having accurate information; being free from coercion and open to alternative perspectives; and having equal opportunity to participate, challenge, and reflect critically (Mezirow, 1991).

Engaging in rational discourse under these conditions can assist adults in becoming more critically reflective of meaning perspectives—or the habitual expectations that serve as filters for how we perceive, understand, and remember—that are:

- More inclusive, discriminating, and integrative of experience
- Based upon full information
- Free from both internal and external coercion
- Open to other perspectives and points of view
- Accepting of others as equal participants in discourse
- Objective and rational in assessing contending arguments and evidence
- Critically reflective of presuppositions and their sources and consequences, and
- Able to accept an informed and rational consensus as the authority for judging conflicting validity claims (Mezirow, 1991, p. 78).

In summary, discourse around globalization in adult education focuses frequently around work issues such as who should be getting jobs, how to preserve jobs in an area, and how to communicate when foreign owners enter with new priorities and new ways of communicating. Three characteristics emerge as important for critical dialogue. First, *an open environment, free of fear and oppression* is necessary in a classroom characterized by differences in ethnicity, class, race, nationality, and gender. Second, *respect for the stories of individuals and communities*; the issue of who to trust is difficult for disenfranchised citizens who have learned that their stories are not safe to tell outside of closed communities, as well as for immigrants who have fled oppressive circumstances. Third, *active problem-posing*; if hegemonic situations are to change, it is through dialogue that includes a plan for action. The problematization (Freire, 1970, 1990; Mezirow, 1991) of the many paradoxes and contradictions characterizing globalization starts with listening to the stories of individuals and then leads to a mapping of connections between individuals, communities, and beyond. It is through collective dialogue that

alternatives for action are identified that lead not to the reproduction of oppressive institutions but rather to liberation.

Talking About Global Issues

When you can't do simple things like read a newspaper, it is very hard to learn about such things as the global economy. . . The global economy, to me, is a worldwide system of producing and distributing goods and services. It is a system where competition is most important. . . In the shop where I work, we build injection molding machines. They are very well made. They have to be because the people who sell the machines must be able to provide an excellent machine at competitive prices. Otherwise companies in the world market will get the business and my job will be lost.

<div align="right">An adult learner in Equipped for the Future (Stein, 1995)</div>

How can adult educators create an open environment in which learners feel free to tell their personal stories, and engage in active problem-posing to connect the personal to the larger community and global levels? Are there specific approaches that teachers and learners can explore in order to make engaging in critical dialogue a habit in their learning around global issues?

A study conducted by Ziegahn (2005) examined the extent to which graduate students reflected critically on the content of a course exploring cultural differences. While this study looked specifically at learning in a course conducted through computer conferencing, it is likely that the findings would also be relevant to face-to-face classroom instruction in which there is dialogue around the individual and global ramifications of intercultural exchange. Similarly, while the study population was composed of graduate students, one of the goals of adult learning at all levels is to gain in the ability to reflect critically on the underlying propositions of the status quo. The study found that students who exhibited higher levels of critical reflection engaged more frequently in certain dialogic approaches, or behaviors: linking cultural positions to inequity, embracing negative emotions, questioning prejudices, reframing underlying premises, and linking experiences to previously learned habits. Following is a discussion of these key behaviors, which may be viewed as approaches to problem-posing dialogue, along with suggestions as to how they might become a part of dialogue around globalization:

Cultural positionality. Positionality emerges from the link learners make between personal cultural background and experiences with power dynamics. The importance of positionality in this study echoed the findings of other adult education researchers who explored critical approaches to dialogue and thinking about culture and power in face-to-face adult learning situations (Alfred, 2002: Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1998; Saavedra, 1995; Taylor, 1994; Tisdell, 1998; Yorks & Kasl, 2002) as well as online (Webb, 2000). Students prefaced their remarks with comments like, "I am a white male who has lost track of his cultural past", or "I am an African-American mother and grandmother whose overarching concern is for raising my grandson to be a black male in the U.S." The power of positionality lays in its primacy within story-telling. Learners reach a level of comfort and trust with one another that enables them to talk further about how they view their often multiple positions in society and how they envision change. Situating themselves first within the global economy provides a vantage point from which to better see the connections between individual community, nation, and world.

Embracing negative emotions. Encounters between people of differing cultural backgrounds often become disorienting dilemmas (Taylor, 1994), characterized by feelings of bewilderment, anger, and fear. This is certainly the case with people who are trying to sort through losing jobs or having to work in a place where all the expected norms of communication and doing business have changed. Critical to an authentic telling of our personal stories is knowing that we don't have to talk about experience in only a positive light. Being able to voice fears and statements that many might find naïve or strange within an atmosphere of mutual respect is essential to critical dialogue. The following example comes from a class on interracial dialogue and action co-taught by the author a number of years ago. Statements by both of these students were made with passion and a large dose of exasperation, but also respect.

> *White student*: Why do we have to be African American, and Latino American, and white American....why can't we all just be American?
> *African-American student:* Because you won't let us.

Because students had spent several weeks preceding this particular class telling personal stories connected to culture, communication, race

and racism, they had gotten to know one another, and an atmosphere of trust and safety developed. No one suggested that the comments of the white student were naïve or insensitive, or that the comments of the African American student constituted a verbal attack on the white student. What ensued was an in-depth discussion involving the whole class about how African Americans' actions are always marked in U.S. society and how they are never allowed to "just forget about race," while white American activity is usually unmarked by racial modifiers and is simply viewed as the cultural norm. Statements that could have been polarizing became the basis for creative and productive dialogue.

Questioning prejudices and reframing underlying assumptions. When cultures collide, we are often surprised to find uncomfortable feelings about the other arising. In an open environment that allows for the admission of fear, doubt, uncertainty, and often deep-seated prejudices, the need to delve deeper into the meaning of these prejudices is also important. This involves the willingness to move out of one's comfort zone, or as one student in the study of critical reflection around culture (Ziegahn, 2005) put it, "walk through fears" and name a particular belief or worldview within a circle of fellow learners. While it is difficult to totally dispense with long-held stereotypes and prejudices, the challenge becomes to learn habits of questioning these views and their underlying assumptions when they emerge and of suspending the tendency to judge. A Canadian student in the study described her thinking upon encountering indigenous culture:

> I was struck by how Native Peoples never made eye contact. It . . . generated the old "tricky Indian" stereotype on a subconscious level. I only realized this when I was invited to a cross-cultural workshop . . . and the point was made that eye contact is considered very rude by Native people . . . Once again, I was caught in my own view of reality and hadn't made that shift in perspective—jumping to conclusions and not know that I didn't know.

Questioning prejudices and past assumptions, and suspending judgment can take place on many levels. In the case of globalization, these can include the interpersonal level, where people have to decide whether to use past, more rigid interpretations of unfamiliar behavior in making meaning; as well as the intra- and inter-group levels, in which

people must weigh whether to judge unfamiliar actions on the basis of their own value systems, or to entertain the possibility that other, unknown—but ultimately knowable—values might be at the base of behavior that is initially viewed negatively.

Reexamining previous intercultural experience in light of new concepts and discussion. Many in adult education have talked about the power of prior experience, both positive and negative, on new learning (Brookfield, 1995; Jarvis, 1987; Taylor, 1998). As adult learners encounter new concepts and theories, they are able to analyze past experiences in a new light. Looking at the macro level, when a textile mill closes, is it just because business is bad, or is it because global economic structures favor production in countries where workers are not unionized and get lower pay? How do you look at workers in developing countries who are now doing the work you used to do—as enemies or as pawns in the same global capitalist system? And at the interpersonal level, when subordinate employees from non-mainstream cultures agree at a meeting to tackle a task right away, but then don't follow through in the manner deemed appropriate by majority culture members, are they viewed as recalcitrant, or as possibly coming from a different worldview where agreement with superiors is an important way of maintaining workplace harmony, especially when the reasons for not accomplishing the task may be difficult to explain? The learning that goes on in adult education classrooms can provide new lenses for interpreting past experiences, and from this reflection, new perspectives and habits on what it means to be a citizen in a global world can emerge.

Talking with Culturally Different Others

I say that learning different cultures and learning how to speak other languages are also important to compete in the global economy. Learning about different cultures is good because I might get a job working with all kinds of people. It's also interesting to know about other cultures.

An adult learner, *Equipped for the Future* (Stein, 1995)

Talking *about* global issues through the habit of critical dialogue is an important dimension of adult education teaching and facilitation. However, learning how to talk *with* others who come from cultures unfamiliar to us is not an automatic skill. Knowing about the common

value dimensions of cultural variance is one piece of intercultural learning that can be useful to engaging in critical dialogue around globalization.

Intercultural communication competence is manifested when a person learns to manage the challenging differences and accompanying stress inherent in attempts at communication with a person or people from unfamiliar cultures (Kim, 1997). The potential intercultural communication opportunities that adult learners bring to classrooms are myriad: ESL (English-as-a-Second Language) classrooms with students from different countries; class differences between and among students and teachers; or the experiences students bring in from the workplace, which could include more obvious differences, such as race, gender, class, and nationality, as well as less obvious differences connected with religious background, sexual orientation, or profession.

When there is tension in dialogue between people of differing cultural backgrounds, a frequent source of misunderstanding can be the misinterpretation of basic cultural values such as individualism and collectivism, time, gender, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance (Anderson, 1997; Hall, 1983; Hofstede, 1980; Ziegahn, 2000) from both sides of an interaction.

Individualism and collectivism. Many intercultural clashes stem from a misunderstanding of how these two core values inform our behaviors. Individualism can be defined as an emotional independence of individual persons from groups, organizations, or other collectivities, with a strong emphasis on equal status, informality, and independence. Collectivist cultures make greater distinctions between in-groups and out-groups, and cherish ideals of group harmony and interdependence (Hofstede, 1980). American cultures, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and some European cultures tend toward the individualistic, with a strong valuing of self-assertion and an ethic that prizes "pulling yourself up by your bootstraps." On the local and global work scenes, this can translate into an emphasis on being first, and making unique contributions in which the individual stands out from the group. This contrasts with the more collectivist worldview of much of the rest of the world wherein an individual's self-worth is integrally connected with the success and well-being of the group or community.

In adult education dialogues, individualists can be labeled selfish by those not understanding the cultural roots of the value, and collectivist behaviors can be perceived as conformist and uncreative by those coming

from an individualistic perspective. One of the interesting outcomes of a globalized environment is the tendency towards movement of cultures from their more traditional cultural values to the values of seemingly opposite cultures. Thus, collectivist cultures move a bit closer to an individualist perspective, while individualists move closer to collectivism.

Time. An important difference in how people view time can be summed up in the concepts of monochronic time and polychronic time (Hall, 1983). People coming from polychronic cultures are more past- and present-oriented rather than future-conscious, while those coming from monochronic cultures view time as a phenomenon that can be controlled and used as a way to bring order to chaos. For example, in the more polychronic Latin American, Asian, African, and to a lesser extent, European cultures, what looks to North Americans like mere "time-wasting" socializing (long lunches, parties, etc.) is actually intended as a way to get to know the other, and to establish bonds of trust. Telling personal stories in a learning environment about experiences with globalization and intercultural contacts may take time, and be frustrating for those from more monochronic cultures. In more popular terms, this distinction is often boiled down to the difference between a people-orientation and a task-orientation—one is not better than the other; yet they are different, and it's important to appreciate the thinking and feeling associated with each of these perspectives.

Gender. In his study of corporate cultural values, Hofstede (1980) termed as masculine those cultures valuing competition, assertiveness, and more rigid sex roles, whereas cultures that place more importance on nurturance and compassion and value women's multiple roles were viewed as feminine. In the situation mentioned earlier, in which male auto industry managers from Asia and American women had divergent views on the latter's role in the workplace, differing understandings on the role of the masculine and the feminine in society were relevant. What may have been viewed as honoring the difference in male/female roles in an Asian context was viewed as discriminatory in the U.S., and dialogue between managers and workers was likely to reflect these inconsistent assessments. While conflicting views on gender roles are a given in most cultures in light of the dynamic, ever-evolving nature of culture itself, these differences are more pronounced in settings in which cultures come together for the first time, often the case with multinational industries.

Power distance. Status hierarchies are perceived in many cultures as ways of ensuring equal treatment for all and in maintaining group harmony. In the U.S., however, hierarchies based on rank, age, or time in a company are frequently viewed as the source of inequities. Hofstede (1980) terms this dimension power distance, meaning the difference between cultures in which power and influence are concentrated in the hands of a few versus more equally distributed power. The degree to which individuals, groups, and communities focus on expertise, social prominence, and the supremacy of long-established cultural norms has much to contribute to interactions within a work environment. In practical terms, this suggests that structuring dialogue within a group that enforces a fairly strict vertical organizational model will be different than dialogue in groups that value more horizontal communication patterns.

Uncertainty avoidance. Another of Hofstede's (1980) dimensions of cultural variation revolves around the degree to which cultures vary in their avoidance of uncertainty; create different rituals and values regarding formality, punctuality, legal and religious requirements; and tolerate ambiguity. Clearly, the globalized environment is characterized by high uncertainty. However, how adult learners from different cultures talk about such a precarious environment can vary considerably, depending on how important it is to either avoid or embrace ambiguity. People from cultures in which it is important to avoid too much risk-taking may prefer dialogue that couches risk in a more thorough discussion of issues, over a long period of time. In contrast, those coming from cultures more tolerant of ambiguity may be more disposed to move quickly to action, and as a result be viewed by those who avoid uncertainty as reckless.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the structuring of critical dialogue about global issues in adult education contexts must take into account the problem-posing nature and behavior of the dialogue process, as well as the values of participants who may differ in cultural background. Adult educators are challenged to devise methods that allow learners to:

- establish cultural position, and give voice to stories about their experiences with race, gender, being the other, etc.,
- give voice to doubts, fears, and potentially unpopular opinions around the social and cultural aspects of globalization,

- interrogate their customary thinking and long-held prejudices around global topics,
- view past experiences in the new light provided by knowledge of different cultural values.

We in the adult education field are in a good position to foster the critical dialogue that seeks to achieve a more just, equitable global environment reflective of Sen's (2000) superior intellectual and human necessities, through our work with our adult—indeed, our global—learners.

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