

## Feature Articles

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# *The Social Dimension of Transformative Learning*

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### Introduction

My goal in this essay is to do five things: articulate a non-psychological discussion of transformational learning; rearticulate the concept of the social construction of reality; define civil society from a Gramscian perspective; relate social movements to the work of organic intellectuals; and, finally, to propose ways of analyzing transformational processes within social movements. My purpose is to make explicit that the education of adults within social movements is not a new phenomenon. Rather, it is the historical resurfacing of transformational learning stripped of the psychologization of the concept whereby its connections to political and economic power issues have been severed.

### A Sociological (Non-Psychological) Perspective

In order to think clearly about adults learning at the edge of social movements, I believe we should divorce our thinking from the cultural and hegemonic blanket of individualism which almost unconsciously frames our thinking. The individual in the North American understanding of that concept is almost disembodied from the society which frames her consciousness or provides cultural meaning to existence. This utilization of the "individual" as the unit of social analysis is so ingrained in adult education practice that the psychologization of adult education practice (Rubenson, 1989) is not easily recognized by most practitioners.

Instead, I think of the individual as "biography." By this I mean that the very notion of "individual" is socially constructed, that is, an "indi-

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vidual” is contextualized in the history, culture, and the social fabric of the society in which she lives. Accordingly, the social dimension of transformational learning is at the intersection of personal biography with the societal structure. In thinking of a person as biography, I hope to avoid the limitations of constructivist psychological (such as Candy, 1991), or social interactionist approaches (such as London, 1964), which focus on individuals in their social context or in interaction with their environment. Even these perspectives can be too individualistic for those of us who, by definition, have a psychological bias. Not that persons do not construct or interact with their environment, but I want to keep our focus in this essay on society and on how the education of adults occurs naturally at the edge of social movements and how social movements have the potential to democratize civil society. Building and democratizing civil society is, for me, central to adult education because it is the transformation of society which is connected dialectically to transformational learning in adults (Collins, 1991; Hart, 1992; Newman, 1994; Zacharakis-Jutz, 1990).

The idea that we, as adult educators, are more than simply purveyors of information to adults is not as contested an idea as it once may have been before Freire (1974). We now recognize the importance of putting information into some context which has meaning, and surely most of us do not contest the idea that the education of adults has a social, as well as, a personal function. The argument for us is which social function. For example, two social functions which dominate our field today ask the question: Do we educate participants to perform in the workplace, or do we educate participants for engagement in constructing a more democratic and egalitarian society? The former does not challenge or critically examine power relationships (Schied, 1995); it reproduces extant power relationships. Organizations want us to perform in the interests of corporations, not society, not democracy. The latter is socially transformative in that it seeks to change social constructions and, in so doing, triggers personal transformations (Cunningham, 1992a; Freire, 1974; Hart, 1991; Horton, Kohl, & Kohl, 1990).

Accordingly, it would be unusual to find transformative learning from a critical sociological perspective in human resource development (HRD) or continuing professional education despite the double loop learning and reflective practitioner rhetoric (Schied, 1995; Cunningham, 1993). “Team building” to increase profits and to promote commodification does not address the unequal distribution of society’s resources and material goods. This type of education serves the market. Some proponents of

HRD deny the “bottom line” mentality and argue that they work outside the market in not-for-profit institutions. However, human resource developers working in non-profit institutions (hospitals, churches, public bureaucracies) whose main function is to provide public service fail to critique the powerful controls these “not for profits” may exert in domesticating those that have been marginalized. By domestication I mean controlling the public through reinforcing the dominant hegemony. In other words, while civil society may be organized for participatory democracy, some parts of civil society are aligned with market interests and serve to reinforce state hegemonic control (Gramsci, 1971). Accordingly, so-called personal transformation that is not formed by action on oppressive structures is suspect even though the involved individual may feel good or even autonomous.

### **Social Construction of Reality**

Let us not take for granted that the social construction of reality is clearly understood by modern adult educators. For if we cannot agree, first of all, that we construct our own social reality and, secondly, that the meaning we give to that reality then retrojects back into and shapes our own consciousness, we will have difficulty comprehending both the social as well as the psychological tether that anchors transformational learning. Conceived in such a way, transformational learning is 1) about making meaning within our cultural boundaries and 2) reshaping our social reality in a more critical and egalitarian manner.

Therefore, we do not have to take for granted social constructions such as slavery, classism, patriarchy, racism, and imperialism. These social constructions and their cultural meanings were made by our predecessors and have been handed down to us by them. As human beings we can use our own agency and ability for critical reflection to negotiate with one another for better social constructions than we now have.

Accordingly, civil society becomes the place to mobilize citizen action to challenge hegemonic forces that reproduce structural inequity. Also, it is democratic social movements that are the natural home for educating adults and building civil society. Let us examine the concepts and the relationships between civil society and social movements.

### **Civil Society**

To provide some conceptual background, I utilize Murphy’s (1997)

historical analysis of the development of the idea of civil society. Murphy distinguishes and disposes of early understandings of civil society put forward by Aristotle, Hobbes, and Adam Smith; it is Hegel, Marx, and Gramsci who provide the modern analysis of civil society and social movements with which we grapple. Hegel put civil society between the family and the state and located the economy within it. Marx stood Hegel's idea of civil society on its head, arguing that in the base/superstructure understanding of society, civil society is in the "base." Murphy (1997) argues that there is a primary difference between the thought of Gramsci and Marx on civil society, although others disagree (Holst, 1997). According to Cohen and Arato, Gramsci "reverses Marx's base/superstructure model, as he places civil society, not in the base as Marx did, but in the superstructure." In so doing, he distinguished civil society from both economic and political society and, further, "recognized the new forms of plurality and association specific to modern civil society in modern churches, unions, cultural institutions, clubs, neighborhood associations, and especially political parties" (as cited in Murphy, 1997, p. 12). It is Gramsci's conceptualization of civil society that I take as my starting point in thinking about transformational learning. Elsewhere, I have noted:

Civil society is the development of the infrastructure within a nation which mediates between the state and its citizens. A strong civil society, which promotes the full participation of its citizens, ensures that we strive towards a participatory democratic goal. It counters the development of a civil society dominated by the powerful interests of the state and those citizens representing a dominant cultural majority. It prevents the marginalization of less powerful sectors be they based on race, ethnicity, gender, or social class. (Cunningham, 1992b, p. 12)

Today the relationship of the state, market, and civil society is changing (Westwood, 1990). The state has been weakened, and the market dominates both the state and civil society. With the growth of transnational business, no state is in control of its own economic forces. It is this domination of our lives by market forces which pushes us to rethink the definition of work and to promote an oppositional discourse within civil society. Hart (1992) calls for a radical new definition of work because the present social construction of work is based on exploitation and promotion of consumerism (comodification) and marginalizes the economic worth of unpaid mother-work and subsistence labor that toils in the fields.

These are social constructions that can be opposed and changed.

Increasingly we have heard it argued that the market and its values (comodification, consumption, material wealth, competition) fuel technical development of the world's societies and that the resulting "trickle down effect" is the best way to alleviate poverty. The increasing disparity of wealth within the Unites States, as well as on a global basis, negates that argument. With the state increasingly powerless to control transnational companies, the source of oppositional forces must come from civil society which engages people face to face.

Gramsci (1971) thought that social change was expedited by "organic intellectuals" who created day-to-day knowledge as distinct from traditional intellectuals who were creators and guardians of historic official knowledge. Organic intellectuals, however, could align themselves either with the interests of the ruling strata and emerging reactionary, repressive forces (such as fascism) or commit themselves to those groups found at the edges of society, the poor and the culturally marginalized.

For Gramsci, all people are capable of being intellectuals, and all social classes produce intellectuals. Those aligned with the state and the market develop knowledge to maintain the hegemonic power of the dominant groups over those without power, and those organic intellectuals from the poor, the marginalized, and working classes, as well as those intellectuals from dominant groups who choose to place their interests with them, provide the place for collective action to promote change in social structures.

How knowledge relates to power is based on our understanding that knowledge is socially produced and that all persons are capable of becoming organic intellectuals. If knowledge is socially constructed, then transformative education has as its goal developing knowledge producers, not knowledge consumers. Knowledge produced by those intellectuals from the "underclass," unskilled workers, or marginalized populations will be quite different from knowledge produced by the economic elites and those organic intellectuals who have placed their self-interest with those who are powerful and, therefore, create knowledge that sustains state hegemony. Accordingly, adult education that occurs within these social spaces and is transformative builds toward a democratic, participatory society because it accesses a countervailing (counter hegemonic) knowledge and power which forces change in the structures of society (Hommen, 1989). It is through maximizing poor people's participation in decision making that the common good can be more democratically defined.

Building civil society as a participatory democracy is best done in adult education by looking for people making social discourse around contradictions as defined by them. Social movements then, are not deviant, as they are often pictured by functionalists, nor are they resource mobilization entities, as described by the technicians; rather, social movements are political sites for redistributing power and devising more equitable social structures. This is the social context of transformative learning.

### Social Movements

Currently, the major debate on social movements hinges on the differences between capitalism and socialism. Many argue that socialism as an idea is dead and, therefore, its central tenet that the working class would supply the revolutionary forces has failed. Most persons arguing this point of view believe that the grand narrative, modernity and the age of reason as encompassed by the enlightenment, is no longer valid. In their view we have moved beyond modernity to post-modernity. Accordingly, new social movements (NSM) are seen, in their most radical interpretations, as replacing "old social movements," e.g., ecology and personal autonomy now replace trade unionism, individual transformation replaces social transformation, and the professional class replaces the poor and working class in leading movements for change.

This debate abounds in the literature. Finger (1989) represents a post-modern viewpoint regarding NSM; learning is for personal autonomy, and there is a rejection of politics. Welton (1993) contests Finger's interpretation and emphasizes the importance of new social movements in (1) revitalizing the old social movement and (2) as sites for collective political action, but he rejects classical Marxist explanations for a Habermasian-based analysis. It can be argued that Habermas-based life world-view is more palatable to U.S. audiences because it can be interpreted as a more individualistic frame and slides away from Marx' fundamental economic class analysis. On the other hand, Spencer (1995) argues that there can be a blending of old and new but holds to the primacy of the Marxist vision.

A careful theoretical analysis supported by empirical data is provided by Tucker (1991), who asks the question, "How new are the new social movements" (p. 75). Melucci (1994) asks the same question; both believe that dichotomizing the old and the new social movements is not warranted, but for very different reasons. This debate is important to us

because some new social movement analysts, such as Finger (1989), 1) encourage a post-modern relativism, 2) promote personal autonomy without contextual grounding, and 3) detach social movement from a broad political ideology by promoting identity politics. These perspectives are not compatible with Gramsci who welcomed alliances within other social groupings but saw these federated groups firmly rooted in a well articulated political and economic reality.

NSMs have the potential to contribute to rationality and its logic. Many of the concerns that drive these movements (ecology, peace, gender equality) are legitimate. However, to be taken seriously, there must be a critical examination of the privilege of those with affluence and white skins who make up these movements. Extant asymmetrical power relationships which characterize the state and that have been constructed historically must also be critiqued. That is to say, peace is an admirable goal, but war has left an imbalance in international power relationships which must be addressed. Ecological goals are appropriate, particularly if we critique the global north and uncontrolled capitalism as problematic. Adult education can be one way to establish that social critique.

### **Analyzing Transformational Processes**

Let us now turn to the processes of transformational learning at the edge of social movements and the subsequent building of civil society. Let us revisit the historical and radical roots of North American adult education. Look at one proposed analytical framework for our practice, and then once more, in Michael Newman's (1994) language, "define the enemy." Davenport writes:

Out of the major historical movements for a more democratic and egalitarian society—like those of the abolitionists, suffragettes, populists, socialists, racial minorities, anarchists, and labor organizers—grew many adult education efforts to engage people in personal and social transformation. A social movement is characterized by a mass effort to reach the minds and hearts of people, to win them over to a new world view, new beliefs that will galvanize them to action and to join in demonstrations against the establishment order. The intentionality of adult education in a movement is revealed by how formal or informal, [sic] or unconscious the educational process is. (as cited in Cunningham, 1989, p. 34)

How do we define social movements, and how do we relate such movements to transformative learning and social change? Holford (1995) notes that the theory of social movements, if cast in terms of the sociology of knowledge, provides a basis for a radically new understanding of the relationship between adult education and the generation of knowledge. Although I am not sure I agree with all of Holford's analysis, I do agree that it is in this social space provided by social movements that knowledge and power can be accessed by the common person. As Thompson (1996) notes,

The history of social movements is a history of people operating in the cracks of superstructures. Of using the energies generated at the margins of systems and organizations. Of exercising considerable imagination, critical thinking, subversion and undutiful behavior to destabilize and de-construct the authority of the inevitable. All of them are ways of "taking back control" based on the inter-relationship between consciousness and courage, between theory and practice. Taking back control and joining with others in collective action to achieve change is at the root of concepts like participation and democracy. It finds its impetus in human agency and can transform people's lives. As well as transforming views about oneself. (p. 21)

The critical analysis of transformational learning at the edge of social movements comes from praxis. For several years, we at Northern Illinois University have been working in partnership on the ground with marginalized poor people struggling to take back their neighborhoods in Chicago. The larger civil rights movement of the 1960s nurtured the more recent Harold Washington political movement whereby a politically independent, African American populist became the first black Chicago mayor (Cunningham & Curry, 1997). Born out of that mayoral movement, over 1,000 persons from Chicago community-based organizations put together a comprehensive Empowerment Zone proposal to struggle together to eliminate poverty and reinvent government. As we talked to these participants, clearly they had experienced transformational learning. Our ongoing question is: How does that occur? And how is it sustained?

One response comes from Dykstra and Law (1994) who propose an analytical framework for popular social movements divided into three parts: vision, critical pedagogy, and pedagogy of mobilization. Vision is defined as an essential dimension of education. "Transformative educa-



tion requires the articulation and remembrance of a vision and the values that sustain it” (p. 123). It is vision, I would add, that allows participants to develop an alternative map of reality, grounded by a political standpoint, as a goal for the educative process.

Critical pedagogy refers to educational practice that critically informs, challenges, and engages people in the creation and re-creation of knowledge. Three dimensions of critical pedagogy are social consciousness, imagination, and dialogue (defined as a critical communication process rooted in a horizontal relationship of people). The elaboration of critical pedagogy in the literature is extensive, and we probably are somewhat familiar with these processes (Freire, 1974; Gobledale, 1994; Gore, 1993; Luke & Gore, 1992; Maher & Tetreault, 1994; Newman, 1994; Weiler, 1988).

However, there may be less familiarity with the pedagogy of mobilization which the authors have elaborated into four dimensions: organizing and building, continuing participation, political action, and coalition and network building. It is this pedagogy of mobilization which provides the grounding of our work in progress. It is essentially the same as Dykstra and Law (1994) define it, i.e., “bottom up leadership development and the development of analytical and strategic thinking” (p.124). We call our project “bottom up leadership development through participatory research and study circles.” Dykstra and Law explicate these four aspects for the pedagogy of mobilization:

*Organizing and building* is a creation of an alternative culture characterized by informed perceptions and expectations of members, the values they hold, and their working style. It implies a complex learning process.

*Continuing participation*, in which ideas, decisions, and effort are meshed into a collective effort, is a place for experiential learning. It is here that leadership development can be learned through conducting meetings, doing participatory research, learning to negotiate, developing strategies, and critical reflection on these ongoing efforts.

*Political action* is an educative process where persons learn to confront and challenge authority. It helps participants relate their immediate actions to the larger political concerns.

*Coalition building* is an opportunity for learners to reflect upon their values and aspirations and, through negotiations, build the movement. This requires an extension of the original vision and the ability to work out compromises with other groups. It is, in Dykstra’s and Law’s (1994) words, “a continuing dialogical process with each other to overcome di-

visiveness and to reach theoretical and practical compromises” (p.125).

This analytic is useful to me because it lays out the robustness for transformational learning within social movements. Within my own experience in the South Chicago project I see how complex a job it is for our community-university team to “develop bottom up leadership” through non-formal processes. There are daily conflicts around social class issues, committed community leaders still have to learn to share their power, community-based organizations have to be restructured and democratized, racial and ethnic cleavages must be problematized, and the neighborhood struggles must also be enlarged to a city-wide coalition of grass roots groups. All of this is done through learning democracy in a critically reflective way.

Furthermore, the city-wide groups must reach out of their region, for example, to Illinois farmers, some of whom have organized study circles to disseminate their own knowledge, acquired through participatory research, about organic farming. This is a long reach from poor and disenfranchised Black and Latino urban dwellers to educated, property-owning, white farmers, but both are engaged in building a more democratic society through transformational learning.

Clearly, this is the work of social movements within the civil society to bring face to face people who have learned to be social actors and have the skills and communicative competence to restructure society across these seemingly unbreachable walls. This is the work of “defining the enemy” and moves the social action into a broader coalition to confront both the market and the state. It is this confrontation that participatory democracy is about; it links us with our historical origins, and it is relevant to 2001 and beyond.

### **Conclusion**

I have built the case for attending carefully to the historical, political, and economic dimensions of socially transformative learning. Starting with a critique of the narrowness and distortion that comes from psychologizing adult education, the argument for reconstruction of our social reality as a basis for transformational learning is provided. Such reconstruction of social reality is linked to the potential of building civil society in the Gramscian tradition.

Social movements were posited as the place where education of adults could naturally occur because transformative education starts where problematizing of social inequity has been identified by learners. Devel-

oping organic intellectuals to build a knowledge base for reconstructing society was seen as the real work of transformative learning. Further, the full social field for such transformational educative activity was adopted from the analytic proposed by Dykstra and Law (1994). Finally, the rejection of individualism and personal privilege was made by a call to "define the enemy," which can be identified by a critical analysis of economic forces and state hegemonic power relationships. This is, for me, the social dimension of transformational learning.

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