Researching dialectics in adult education
(Symposium)

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Our contemporary paradigm of adult education is increasingly characterized by the
debates surrounding lifelong learning and the transition of adult education policy to a
rationale-economic model. In this context, progressive adult educators have responded
with an increased emphasis on adult learning in community-based settings such as social
movement learning and community development. These analyses, however, often narrow
our understanding of adult learning to the same conceptualizations of non-formal and
informal learning that are implicated in the skill-based project of lifelong learning (Gorman,
2008). Ultimately, these approaches to inquiry divide the individual from the larger social
and material relations in which their learning is bound up and through which their
consciousness is generated. In response to this problem, and in order to chart a path for
critical inquiry in adult education, this symposium introduces four on-going thesis research
projects located in community settings, which employ a dialectical materialist analysis to
the phenomenon under inquiry. The four papers are offered independently and then
followed with some concluding remarks on the larger purposes of pursuing a dialectical
materialist framework in adult education.

The first paper introduces a working understanding of dialectical materialism through an
analysis of citizenship education research in the United States. The literature on
citizenship education is analyzed in terms of its theoretical presuppositions, which begin in
idealist ontology. Dialectical materialism is then offered as a method to address the
ideological nature of citizenship education and redirect inquiry towards a Marxist
conception of consciousness. The second paper explores the relevance of Marxist
concepts to learning and education, including primitive accumulation, dialectics and the
social relations of capital through an analysis of First Nations peoples’ experience and
resistance in Canada. Understanding the experience of Indigenous people is crucial to
Aboriginal and non-Indigenous people alike who seek to re-direct the dominant trends of
education that de-historicize and de-politicize collective struggle. Education that
contemplates the history of people whose material reality and land struggle necessarily
positions them in a dialectical relationship with the Canadian state and large-scale
development gears learning to transform relations of power. Based on experiences and
interactions with women activists, women’s NGOs and government officials in Northern
Iraq, the third paper is the beginning of a complex project that examines the relationship
between adult education and imperialism and the role that women's NGOs are playing in
maintaining this relationship through projects of democracy training. The final paper
deploys a Marxist conception of negative ideology to unpack the ‘emancipatory’ discourse
of gentrification. Gentrification in urban centres is generally regarded by the public as
positive transformation of disinvested urban space. This discourse conceals the material
effects of gentrification, the displacement of poor people and the exacerbation of
affordable housing crises, while promoting a neo-liberal understanding of development and
entrenching a class-based politics of place.

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