Skills training and therapeutic education: a critique from Bourdieu’s notion of méconnaissance

Antony Chum, University of Toronto/OISE, Canada

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Within the field of adult education, Gramsci’s conception that relations of hegemony are necessarily educational relationships is often cited to emphasize that learning must take place through acts of domination, subjugation, power, and resistance (Mayo, 1999; Brookfield, 2005). In this paper, I will explore ideologies in education that attempt to say the opposite: education as commonsensical, pragmatic, apolitical, presented as the most natural ways of either 1) improving the workers’ skills for the purpose of increasing competitiveness as the panacea for all sorts of social ills (based on the assumption of the inevitability of global capitalism), or 2) increasing self-esteem (based on the assumption that social ills rest with and are caused by individuals and their low self-esteem, negative attitudes and personal outlook). These two dominant ideologies are discussed in relation to how they serve the neoliberal agenda. The main argument of this paper is as follows: in the face of the pervasive ‘ideology of training’ for the ‘knowledge economy’ that disguises education as the only way for the achievement of economic and social prosperity, a second (complementary) ideology has emerged that further depoliticizes adult education by dressing up personal empowerment as social and economic transformative interventions (Ecclestone, 2004; Emler, 2001). Both ideologies work at the evacuation of a structuralist analysis for the production and reproduction of inequality, injustice, and domination and replace this perspective with an individualist and meritocratic perspective; furthermore, it produces what Bourdieu has termed méconnaissance (misrecognition) that is favorable for the maintenance of the dominant (neoliberal) social order because the dominant paradigm is misrecognized as natural or inevitable.

In the first section, I will draw from the ‘learning for the knowledge economy’ and ‘training as panacea’ paradigm (Cruikshank, 2002) to illustrate the way in which knowledge production and reproduction is depoliticized and disguised as natural and value/interest-free. Within this paradigm, education is simply the means to improve skills of workers, so that they are prepared for the ‘knowledge economy’ and market competition: a false cure for rampant social and economic problems that serves to disguise the colonizing neoliberal agenda. It is necessary to deconstruct this view and to reveal the interests and motives behind it, and who benefits from it. At this point, drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, I will discuss the doxic nature of the ‘training as panacea’ paradigm by pointing to the restrictions placed on the very frames of this civic debate, and its connection to Thatcher’s ‘There is no alternative’ (TINA) rhetoric. In the second section, the increasing therapeutic ethos of adult education presents personal empowerment (development of positive attitudes, confidence, and self-worth) as panacea for social and economic ills. In each section, the dissonance between ethos (lived everyday experience) and logos (representations of reality) are analyzed as a way to discuss how the dominant/capitalist interests and values are disguised as natural and inevitable. I also draw on my observations of both trends as they are manifested in Toronto, Canada, where I currently reside. Wacquant provides the analytical basis for the rest of this paper:

Critical thought must, with zeal and rigor, take apart the false commonplaces, reveal the subterfuges, unmask the lies, and point out the logical and practical
contradictions of the discourse of King Market and triumphant capitalism, which is spreading everywhere by the force of its own self-evidence, in the wake of the brutal collapse of the bipolar structure of the world since 1989 and the suffocation of the socialist project (and its adulteration by supposedly leftwing governments de facto converted to neoliberal ideology). Critical thought must tirelessly pose the question of the social costs and benefits of the policies of economic deregulation and social dismantling which are now presented as the assured road to eternal prosperity and supreme happiness under the aegis of 'individual responsibility'… The primary historical mission of critical thought . . . is to perpetually question the obviousness and the very frames of civic debate so as to give ourselves a chance to think the world, rather than being thought by it, to take apart and understand its mechanisms, and thus to reappropriate it intellectually and materially (Wacquant, 2004).

Section one: learning for the knowledge economy

Ireland observed in the 1970s that lifelong education policies within the dominant perspective tend to ignore their own political implications and assumed its own value neutrality: topics tend to cluster around motivating people to learn, educational management and administration (Ireland, 1978). Almost three decades later, the pervading ideology still bears many similarities (Cruikshank, 2002; Dunk et al., 1996). The 'training as panacea' rhetoric advocates the development of skills presumably required for the new economy, increased productivity and competitiveness. This is the same neoliberal thrust that has expanded the labour market, only through flexible, low-wage and insecure employment – not high skilled jobs (Shields, 1996; Reid, 1996; Stanford, 2001). The 'clarion call to educate' oneself is promoted by the media, politicians and educators as a solvent for poverty, low productivity, social and economic inequality, and even the excesses of global capitalism (Stanford, 2001). This perpetuates the assumption that there is plenty of work if people develop the skills to meet the requirements of the marketplace (Cruikshank, 2002); therefore, the structural crisis of our new economy is effectively disguised and swept under the aegis of individual responsibility and effectively depoliticized.

Who really benefits from the 'training for competitiveness' paradigm?

Dunk et al. observe that the pervasive 'training for competitiveness' paradigm effectively transfers funding from social and income security programs into retraining programs and shifts the blame for high unemployment to individuals (1996). Similarly, provincial 'learn-fare' and 'workfare' programs effectively force people to take bad jobs (Reid, 1996), dead-end training programs (Cruikshank, 2002), lower their employment expectations, and also provide yet another source of precarious labour for the market. In this way, lifelong learning, colonized by the neoliberal agenda, has the ability to maintain an economic social order that promotes collective irresponsibility and mercantile egoism while at the same time disguising its own interest in trapping the poor in poverty so that labour remains cheap and flexible.

The ideology of training within the context of 'TINA'

The ideological/doxic nature of 'training for competitiveness' needs to be examined in order to understand how this view came to dominate the debate. According to Pierre Bourdieu, one salient feature of doxa (his contribution to the understanding of ideology) is the way in which it is able to disguise the 'specific/arbitrary' as 'universal, natural, and value/interest free' (Wacquant, 2004; Bourdieu, 1984). By asserting that the left verses right political split is no longer valid in the new economy (McQuaig, 1998), the proponents
of the ‘training for competiveness’ paradigm inject a common sense quality (i.e. Ontario Premier Mike Harris’ ‘Common Sense Revolution’) that resonates a neoliberal leitmotif from the Margaret Thatcher years with her (in)famous ‘there is no alternative’ (TINA) slogan.

Since the ideology of training draws from the TINA rhetoric and acts in the same way to depoliticize and restrict the very frames of civic debates, the roots of its naturalness and inevitability should be elaborated upon. The position that there is no alternatives to global free-market liberalism (or TINA) is proffered by the right (Fukayama, 1992) as well as the left (Giddens, 1998). While on the right, TINA is the flagship discourse for the supremacy and inevitability of global capitalism; the leftist version of the TINA argument seems to result from the ‘postsocialist’ vacuum of vision identified by Fraser (1997), although Allman (2001) locates TINA within the limits of redistributitional interpretations of socialism (Chum et al., 2007). While in reality there is great dissonance between ethos (lived everyday experience) and logos (representations of reality), skills upgrading has not produced a more equitable society or solved any of the problems it proclaims to solve, i.e. this ethos-logos dissonance is maintained through a dominant language that discredits the spontaneous political discourse of the dominated. The dominated are dispossessed of the experience (ethos) that they try to express: the connection from ethos to logos is severed through the dissemination of a language that promotes “false recognition” (Bourdieu, 1984). The ‘training as panacea’ claim works with the TINA rhetoric (and mutually reinforces each other) to disguise the neoliberal agenda as the only valid position (i.e. the inevitability of global capitalism, thus, the necessity to increase competiveness through training).

In Toronto, most higher education institutions have a department of continuing education that is largely dedicated to skills training. Advertisements of these skills training programs are pervasive and can be found on the public transit, billboards, newspapers, and television commercials. Many of these ads target the working adult market, like the ‘Where learning leads’ campaign of Ryerson university that began in July 2006, or the George Brown College’s ‘George Brown gets you the job’ campaign, which advertises industry recognition, full accreditation, flexibility, and corporate training. Many cite statistics of the number of graduates that get jobs within a specified duration and have complicated mechanisms and corporate affiliations that position them as gate-keepers of even the most menial office jobs (i.e. business diplomas/certificates for office assistants, clerks, and bookkeepers). As higher education institutions resort to financial success stories, lucrative pay scales and possible entrance to hot job markets to attract new students, there is a danger of reducing the nature of education to individualistic and financial gains. Similarly, when we are called upon to think of problems of unemployment and poverty, these issues are naturalized within a pervasive space of skill upgrading as individualistic problems rather than thinking of the larger set of social relations and material conditions that govern them.

**Section two: learning as therapy**

A second and complementary model of adult learning, namely ‘learning as therapy’ helps to promote the individualist nature of education as part of the neoliberal agenda. In popular culture, this notion is epitomized by the influential television host Oprah Winfrey in saying that ‘the lack of self-esteem is the root of all the problems in the world’ (Emler, 2001). There is a trend of linking the lack of self-esteem to a range of social problems especially in the UK adult education literature (Ecclestone, 2004). Furthermore, the intuitive appeal behind this paradigm is undeniable: how we feel about ourselves is seen as the primary determining factor that affects our capacity and competence for life, including academic
achievement, career, even extending to other life-arenas such as social inclusion and exclusion, the effects of deprivation, and predictions about one's chances of being ill, criminal, or poor. Nicolas Emler shows the pervasiveness of this view in his extensive review of the conceptual and empirical literature surrounding self-esteem in education and a thorough evaluation of its popularity (2001). While attempts at personal empowerment to improve self-esteem as a pseudo-social justice intervention seems benign, it is often a slippery slope to so-called 'social' transformation projects through introspection and personal change alone. North American culture is replete with these false narratives: many talk-show hosts and self-help gurus (including Oprah, Dr. Phil, etc.) are known for their retelling of 'rags to riches' narratives, where famous actors, sport stars or entrepreneurs mark their success on screen through their changed positive attitude, personal outlook and motivation that has led them to social and economic upliftment. Similar to the 'training as panacea' paradigm, the individual through his or her 'feelings' or their willingness to submit themselves to therapy are responsible for their own social and economic location.

In Toronto, there is a recent increase in the number of institutions for therapeutic education usually given a pseudo-intellectual patina. Among the institutions, the self-referential 'School of Philosophy' is probably the most well-known with its pervasive advertising campaign. The school in Toronto is one of the 50+ locations found across the world: including the UK, US, West Indies, Continental Europe, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, and South America. Well attended by established adults with careers (MacKinnon, 2002), participants in the program learn to 'overcome personal and social obstacles' through 'simple and life-changing practices' in order to lead more satisfied and purposeful lives. The fundamental assumption, similar to the 'pop psychology' interventions mentioned above, takes the individual as both cause and solvent for a slew of social problems, rather than understanding the social relations that reproduce and conceal inequity.

'Pedagogy for self-esteem' and roots in the humanist tradition

In the following, I will further illustrate this growing paradigm with a couple of examples from the UK. First, in the UK Department for Education and Skills, funding is made available to produce empirical evidence of returns to the individual and society in human and social capital, produced by investments in education, and especially in the so-called 'identity capital' that contributes to 'positive self-image and confidence'. Second, expanding on the personal development movement of the 1980's, Careers Counseling Development Unit at the University of Leeds is influential in promoting new ideas about teaching and learning. Drawing on therapy based on transactional analysis and humanist counseling (Ecclestone, 2004), adult educators are encouraged to apply notions such as 'unconditional positive regard for learners', 'genuine empathy', 'active listening' and reflexive questioning to their classroom activities. These notions are derived from humanist educator Carl Rogers especially in his influential books *Freedom to Learn* and *Becoming a Person* (1961; 1983). This view of 'self' regards humans as 'innately good and self-actualizing, naturally bent towards becoming self-aware, trustworthy, responsible and constructive' (Nolan, 1998; Mezirow, 1991). For Bennetts, who comes from a similarly humanist perspective, developing human agency is predicated on the 'knowledge of "self" and how one [reflects upon the process in which] "self" has been formed' (Bennetts, 2003).

It should be noted that the views above should not be conflated with the entire humanist tradition. A brief look at the history of the humanist tradition would reveal that the current obsession with the 'discovery of the self' is not always the case. In fact, according Malik (2000), humanism links our inner and outer worlds and depicts humans as agents in transforming both worlds. Yet, growing interests in evolutionary psychology, post-modern
philosophy, and risk consciousness, together with the decline of civic engagement in politics, reveal growing disillusionment with the transformation of the outer world. Malik further argues that these trends offer an increasingly narrow and introspective view of humanism and encourage the idea that attempts to dominate the world around us can be dangerous.

The impact of the 'therapeutic ethos' on theories and practices of social change

In Michael Newman’s two books *Defining the Enemy* (1994) and *Maier’s Regard* (1999), he identifies the above humanist-liberalism as one of the most powerful sources of hegemony in adult education today. This hegemony which emphasizes the need to help people analyze their experience and become aware of their assumptions leads to 'voluntary suppression of organized action' (Newman, 1994). One of the central arguments in *Defining the Enemy* is that marginalized communities are encouraged to divert their attention, away from the real problem of defining the enemy, towards narcissistic obsession with simply their own experiences and perceptions as victims. Moreover, Newman claims that this self-understanding often leads to self-absorption. As an alternative, he offers the following advice:

Rather than helping learners look at themselves, we should help them look at the thugs and the bigots, the people who do not care, the people who intrude, the people who misuse their authority... by doing this we can encourage people to be outward looking, to be active and activist. We can help them focus their anger on the cause of their anger. And we can set up situations in which we and the people we are working with think, plan, learn and decide action. (Newman, 1994)

Returning to the ethos/logos analysis, in this case, the lived experiences of structural ills and excesses of the new economy are disguised through representations of these ills as problems of personal motivation, negative attitudes and low self-esteem. Thus, it produces a misrecognition that is favorable for the maintenance of the dominant (neoliberal) social order by restricting the scope and depth of social analysis and radical social transformation practices to simply personal empowerment.

Conclusion: radical education for the expansion of the frames of civic debate and solvent for doxa

When the dominated class continues to (re)produce a discourse that is in contradiction with itself and domination seems to be complete and totalizing, i.e. caught in an inescapable quagmire of ethos/logos dissonance (Bourdieu, 1984), resistance seems futile. However, it is important to understand that the sense of 'complete/totalizing domination' is part of the nature of doxa: by presenting itself as encompassing of all possibilities, it delimits what is politically thinkable, knowable and questionable. While this hope/energy sapping nature of doxa has even claimed leftist scholars such as Giddens (i.e. to accept the inevitability of global capitalist development), Williams writes that '[its power is] never total or exclusive. At any time, forms of alternative or directly oppositional politics and culture exist as significant elements in the society' (Williams, 1977). In order for us to perpetually challenge doxa, Ireland poses some basic, but important, questions to reveal the political and the social relations that underlie education: 'In what direction do we want to move?', 'what changes are we aiming at?', 'what priorities do we want to establish?', and 'who is to decide?' (Ireland, 1978). In order to 'recognize' and to unmask the subterfuges and contradictions of the discourse of King Market and triumphant capitalism through the development of critical praxis, it seems now apropos 'to restore to the word "critical" the idea of laying blame: so that critical thinking should include
identifying and exposing those who are duplicitous or dangerous or exploitative or monstrous or weak and who by being so cause harm to us and/or others' (Newman, 1994).

**References**


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