

Exploring networked possibilities for governance: considering the influence of globalisation and cosmopolitanism on learning for social democratic purposes

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Introduction

Learning for social democratic purposes presupposes a broader understanding of adult learning than is often acknowledged within neoliberal contexts. Critical and feminist discourses point to the narrowness of a concept of lifelong learning that is connected primarily to the marketplace. The significance of other kinds of learning, as the field of critical adult education has traditionally championed, needs to be considered if we are to understand the importance of learning for active citizenship and deliberative democratic purposes.

This paper draws upon the concepts of globalisation and cosmopolitanism to explore how a more networked approach towards governance might be developed to enhance learning for social democratic purposes. Initial findings from an ongoing research project funded by the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) designed to investigate connections between adult learning for citizenship in relationship to grassroots organisations and public participation in governance is provided. A critical feminist theoretical framework is then overviewed and applied to explore how adult educators can engage with community-based organizations to better support learning for democracy and citizenship, taking into account the influence of globalisation and cosmopolitanism.

Overview of research study

This CCL research study, entitled *Grassroots and Governance*, entails a careful exploration of literature around the themes of active citizenship, civil society, governance, and deliberative democracy, as well as case studies of six different civil society (grassroots) organizations located in different regions in Canada. The case studies involve a review of literature produced by the organizations, such as annual reports and publicity materials. In addition, there is a site visit to each organization's office, and interviews with two or three individuals who have had significant involvement from the organization, preferably from different contexts, such as being a volunteer, staff member, or member of the executive. While a small scale study such as this cannot begin to reflect the variety and range of grassroots, community-based organizations that exist within Canada, an attempt was made to bring in fairly diverse perspectives by including organizations from both larger cities and smaller towns/cities, in different geographical regions within Canada, and with different mandates.

Drawing upon a strategy that I have used in other research projects, this study also involves interviews with 'key informants' who work within policy, non-profit, and government sectors. The purpose of these interviews is twofold; to obtain information from a different framework or perspective on the issues being explored, and secondly, to encourage the early involvement of policy makers in the research process by asking them to participate in the study.

Globalisation and cosmopolitanism

To understand notions of governance and citizenship today, the importance of globalisation must be considered. John Field (2000) argues that to understand how lifelong learning affects how notions of governance are being transformed today involves exploring both how power is directed downwards to individuals and associations (active citizens and civil society groups), and upwards, to transnational corporations and intergovernmental bodies. Understanding the policies and practices that can support citizen engagement through civil society organizations and in governance requires taking into account the globalised economic and social context of citizenship in today's world.

The influence of neoliberalism has shifted the focus of lifelong learning from that of being primarily a social responsibility to being an individual responsibility. In my recent Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) study on women's learning trajectories, it became clear that decisions around participation in formal learning contexts is often considered to be a personal responsibility. Within what Beck (2001) has termed the 'risk society', people come to understand that the forces of globalisation create situations of flux and uncertainty. Therefore, each person is charged with the responsibility of navigating successfully through the uncertain tides of corporate change, political upheaval, and technological innovation. To do this may involve career changes, educational 'upgrading', and continual learning. Personal decisions around diet, saving for retirement, and taking academic programs are assessed in the contexts of potential risks that may pay off – or may not. Ultimately, individuals are expected to assess their circumstances and chart their own pathways.

Unfortunately, current policies that shape lifelong learning in a neoliberal context tend to reinforce the status quo and screen out the social factors that often shape life chances such as class, race and gender. The influence of social roles, obligations, and structural limitations are not addressed adequately with regards to how they impact upon personal decisions around life and learning trajectories. As Cruikshank (2002, pp.141) argues, within a neoliberal context, differential opportunities and supports lead to 'increasing polarization between the rich and the poor'. Ultimately, it can be seen that education becomes one more factor that divides nation-states, (as well as groups of individuals within nation-states) privileging some and disadvantaging others.

Ulrich Beck (2001) presents the argument that we can challenge the way in which globalised capitalism is shaping our societies. He argues that we can approach globalisation from a different position, radically reconsidering the opportunities it offers for us as citizens of the world to work in collaborative ways that are not determined solely by marketplace demands. Cosmopolitanism is a central concept required to understand the motivating factors that encourage individuals to bridge differences in a common attempt to solve shared problems that cannot be addressed by isolated individuals or nation states. Concerns such as pollution, terrorism, and racism cannot be resolved successfully unless we consider how these issues must be taken up within the broader global context. Arguing that since large corporations today possess more power (and take less responsibility) than most nation-states for their actions, Beck (2001) proposes that we need to conceive of an alternative framework for governance within the context of a globalised world. Beck (2001, pp.88) suggests that

The new state option of a cosmopolitan, interactive, and reflexive state, which seeks to reconstitute its power at the intersection of global, regional and local systems of governance, is emerging where previously there was only the alternative of either national self-

determination or submission to the authority of someone else's nation-state.

Positing that we already work within a globalised framework of governance, as can be seen by agreements such as the North American Free Trade Act (NAFTA), we might as well be proactive in determining what kind of political, economic, and social agreements we might want to negotiate. In this way we can factor in broader considerations that are frequently overlooked or devalued within a neoliberal context.

Grassroots and governance: initial findings

The initial findings of my CCL study on *Grassroots and Governance* indicate that there are not always clear or similar linkages between community-based organizations, citizen involvement, and government. To illustrate this, I will compare three different organizations and their expectations around funding relationships and volunteer participation.

In looking at three of the different organizations and the way that they approach the issue of funding, there are three different approaches in their expectations and connections with government.

The *Multicultural Council of Windsor and Essex County* located in southern Ontario, is similar to probably the majority of community-based organizations in Canada in that it depends almost completely on government grants and subsidies for its existence. One of the challenges that this organization faces is that there are a couple of other organizations within the local area that carry out a similar mandate, so even though there are attempts to be cooperative, often the survival of an organization places it in competition with other grassroots associations. Another challenge is that government monies tend to be short-term, so the organization continually has to write new grants in order to fund programs, which makes it difficult to do long term planning. Putting together funding for ongoing leadership roles such as executive or program directors is also problematic, as money has to usually be pieced together from different grants to provide salaries for these positions.

A second organization, *Fareshare* food bank, located in Oakville, Ontario, is entirely independent of government funding, and wants to stay that way. The members of the executive argue that being independent of government funding allows them a measure of autonomy that they value. They also do not see a need to have closer connections to government in order to continue to offer the services that they provide. Donations, both cash and food/clothing items come from the community at a high enough rate to keep food bank functioning. The survival of the organization, however, is almost completely dependent upon a small group of dedicated, older volunteers.

A third organization, the *Ability Society*, located in Calgary, Alberta, is designed to provide assistance to individuals with special ability needs. This organization receives some funding from government, but is moving towards a model of social entrepreneurship, with the objective of becoming increasingly financially independent of government funding. In talking with the leadership of the organization, the challenge of being dependent upon government funding is that the uncertainty and constraints, as well as continual competition with other organizations, makes it difficult for an organization to chart its own path. This organization has branched out in some innovative directions, such as using 'voluntourism' whereby people pay as much money as they would to go on an ordinary vacation, but instead travel to a developing country (such as Cambodia) to work on a local

volunteer project. Proceeds are used to fund the projects.

Each of these organizations has different levels of involvement of volunteers from the community. Many of the volunteers (as well as the staff) at the *Multicultural Council* have either had the experience of being a Newcomer (a term used in Canada for recent immigrants or refugees), or come from a family who has a recent history of immigration to Canada. It is important to many of the volunteers to help others with the transition of becoming a Canadian citizen. Usually volunteers have been in Canada for at least a few years, as the first few years Newcomers arrive in the country they are usually focused on basic survival – getting a home, obtaining citizenship, and finding employment in their area of expertise.

The volunteers at the *Fareshare* food bank are almost all white, middle class, and retired. Their motivation for being involved varies, but is often linked with a desire to fill their time in retirement with work that has a sense of purpose.

They are not inspired so much by a desire to 'do good', but rather want to keep a sense of connection with the larger community by focusing their energies in a positive way. At the same time they seem to take pride that through their work they do indeed benefit others by ensuring that many people on a limited income will be provided with at least a week's worth of food through their association each month.

The *Ability Society* has a variety of volunteers, some of whom are also clients of the organization. For example, one of the volunteers interviewed for this study teaches computer skills. He also has a disability that makes it challenging for him to communicate orally. His volunteer work provides him with a positive focus for his energies, while assisting others to develop useful skills. As a citizen, he feels limited in his participation in the knowledge economy because of his disability. He is a volunteer because there are limited employment opportunities in his field of expertise because of his disability, so this is the alternative choice.

Critical feminist theory

Critical feminist theory draws upon the work of Jurgen Habermas (2001), who explores the possibilities for dialogical and communicative forms of learning in a world where the *system* (political/economic structures) have become increasingly disconnected from the *lifeworld* (local community). The active participation of citizens within civil society movements can recreate linkages between the system and lifeworld. In doing so, opportunities for social democratic learning emerge. A feminist lens further develops this critical analysis by drawing attention to the underlying patriarchal orientation of the *system*, that gives primary value to marketplace, undermining the value of unpaid labour. In this context, women and minorities, such as those with disabilities, are marginalized, and not viewed as fully participating citizens. A critical feminist perspective argues for a more holistic approach within lifelong learning contexts, that acknowledges the broader contributions made by citizens both within and outside of the paid labour force (Gouthro, 2007). It also points to the need to create more opportunities for marginalized individuals to participate in the paid economy, as a component of full citizenship rights.

In his critique of the notion of community in a rapidly changing world, Zygmunt Bauman states 'Ours are times of disengagement.' (2001, pp.127). A critical feminist approach reveals that active citizenship, civil society, and a networked approach to governance may be strategies for challenging this assumption. Similarly, Beck's (2001) work around cosmopolitanism points to a direction whereby globalisation can be addressed in a more positive way, to create global solutions instead of global problems. Lifelong learning that is

connected to community-based associations and designed to foster active citizenship can help develop the capacities needed to create a more engaged citizenry, and a more responsive approach to governance in Canadian (and perhaps within other national) contexts.

Johnston (1999) defines *active citizenship* as an opportunity for citizens to work towards social justice goals in a collaborative way. Active citizens may engage in the process of governance, either through the formal political process, or through their participation on community-based groups.

Welton (2005) discusses how *civil society* (grassroots organizations) create an important realm for initiating social change, providing informal and often critical forms of learning, and for fostering democratic possibilities for adult education. Habermas (2001) argues that lively participation in civil society is one of the prerequisites for a robust and democratic public sphere.

Saint-Martin (2004, pp.14) draws upon Pierre and Peters (2000) to discuss *governance*, arguing that 'part of the appeal of governance as a concept is its capacity – unlike the narrower term government – to cover the whole range of institutions and social relationships involved in the process of governing. Traditionally, governance is depicted as having three possible orientations; a) a top-down approach, b) control through the marketplace, or c) a networked approach that establishes connections with community-based organizations. Saint-Martin (2004, pp.15) believes this may be somewhat oversimplistic, 'the view that we are shifting from hierarchies to markets and then to networks "forgets" a number of important changes'. However, aspiring towards a more networked approach may be a way to foster stronger democratic linkages and create a more active and engaged citizenry.

Ultimately, by drawing upon critical and feminist theories, adult educators may question the current direction of lifelong learning that is often supported by a neoliberal agenda which places responsibility for learning upon the individual. The expectation that each person must take charge of their own learning agenda undermines the belief that education is a social responsibility. It fosters a learning hierarchy, where far too many people are located at the bottom of the pyramid. In addition, this approach does not take up the crucially important questions that all of us within in a globalised world need to consider, around issues such as sustainability, violence, and food security.

Learning for social democratic purposes

Welton (2005, p. 213) argues that:

One of the fundamental questions facing the developmental humanist tradition of adult education research and practice is: What precisely are the enabling conditions for strong democracy in our networked world?

This CCL study is an attempt to explore some of the answers to this question, by looking at the complicated intersections of citizen involvement in the public sphere through their involvement with grassroots organizations. As can be seen by the preliminary results of this study, this is not a simple or coherent picture.

One of the effects of neoliberalism and globalisation has been cutbacks to the welfare state, which in Canada has had a rather profound effect upon many of the things that we have traditionally taken pride in. Homeless people wandering the streets was a rarity in Canadian cities thirty years. Now, as one of the key informants in Calgary noted, it has

increased several hundredfold. Despite having one of the richest per capita incomes in the country, with million dollar estates lining the shores of Lake Ontario, Oakville has a food bank with a steady supply of clients, many of whom are newcomers to Canada.

Learning that is connected to social democratic purposes draws attention to the need for a critically informed and engaged citizenry. It is not sufficient to simply think of education as an individualized, personal life choice. Within the globalized marketplace, students often consider themselves to be consumers – charged only with the responsibility of making the best choice (or investment) for themselves. As critical adult educators have noted, the impact of the system on the lifeworld can be seen in the emphasis on the marketplace in educational contexts (Gouthro, 2007; Welton, 2005). In the critical adult education tradition, however, learners are also challenged to think about what they have to contribute to the broader society. Concerns around social justice, equity, and fairness are raised, not only with regards to how they impact upon the individual, but with regards to how we address these concerns collectively.

Globalisation is shaping learning and social contexts in the everyday world (lifeworld) we all exist within. Bauman (2001) notes amidst the uncertainty of the twenty-first century, there is a desire to dream about a sense of community that will provide one with a sense of security and belonging. However, case studies on the grassroots associations in this study reveal that while the focus of organisations may be primarily on local communities, the challenges that they must address are linked to global concerns. *Fareshare* is a food bank supported by local Oakville citizens to help other local Oakville citizens. Yet many of these citizens are newcomers to Canada, arriving as a part of the broader influx of migrations occurring across the world. One of the strategies to provide new programs and revenue to support them in the *Ability Society* is to develop voluntourism programs, enticing Canadian citizens to spend their vacation dollars on development projects abroad. Funding for the *Multicultural Council in Windsor and Essex County* is dependent upon funding from federal and provincial governments, that is often determined in the context of a global marketplace whereby multiculturalism is assessed according to its social and economic implications for the nation-state and regions.

The idea of a networked approach towards governance is worth exploring, but it cannot be idealized. There are many complicated factors that shape the connections between active citizenship, grassroots organizations, and governance, and as can be seen, in some instances linkages may be missing or strained within broader networks. Not all participants in local groups are interested in fostering connections with formal government. Government funding policies and practices may foster problems with competition between organizations with similar mandates.

Beck's (2001) idea of cosmopolitanism may have some merit, as a way of encouraging citizens to think in a broader way about how their local concerns are linked to global contexts. Using a critical feminist framework for analysis draws attention to some of the tensions between the different expectations of the lifeworld and the system, and the challenges facing adult educators interested in social justice, inclusion, and equity issues.

This research study on *Grassroots and Governance* may help to provide insights into the kinds of policies and practices that need to be established to foster lifelong learning that is linked with active citizenship. By drawing upon these critical forms of analysis, it may be possible to revisit the concept of learning for social democratic purposes, taking into account the influence of globalisation and possibilities of cosmopolitanism.

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