Exploring innovative ways of holding onto transformative practices in an adult education programme in South Africa

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Introduction
This study is interested in the different motivations of adult educators and their changing relationship with the field of adult education and sets out to explore what the implications are for an adult education programme’s curricula and teaching practice. In exploring this question I would like to find ‘innovative ways of holding onto transformative practices’ (Walters and Manicom, 2008). The research draws on theoretical and policy research as well as qualitative data from ongoing interviews with students, funders and directors of organisations who fund or send their educators onto the programme.

The advanced certificate in adult education
My paper is focussed on the adult education students on the Advanced Certificate for Adult Educators (ACE) at the University of Cape Town. This programme is a part-time professional development programme and currently with 20 registered learners enables adult education practitioners to critically reflect on their practice through different theoretical lenses and to improve the quality of their practice.

Students on the programme come from a wide range of fields – development projects, social movements, trade union sector, adult basic education and training (ABET), workplace training, human resource development, health education (including HIV/AIDS), educators within libraries, museum, art schools and the state and corporate sector.

Historically the ACE drew its students from a middle class of adult educators with an undergraduate degree working in NGOs, CBO’s and anti-apartheid movements. This changed post-apartheid and in 1999 new education policies in Higher Education embraced recognition of prior learning and alternative access routes into Higher Education (White Paper 3, 1997). These policies allowed adult educators to access the ACE qualification though various modes viz. recognition of prior learning. Access via multiple routes into the programme resulted in a more diverse student body in terms of ideologies, race, class, sites of practice and academic ability which also called for curricula changes and changes in teaching methodologies.

The ACE curriculum changed in 2000 to reflect new Higher Education policy and economic changes in the country and to be more closely aligned with the more diverse student body. The curriculum includes courses which take into account the response of adult education to development needs in the country and transformative projects linked to social movements. It also takes into account reforms in the workplace, South Africa’s entry into a global market and includes learning in the workplace, project management and assessment practices. In this way it tries to be socially responsive to the ideals of equity, redress, social justice and economic concerns such as building the capacity of adult educators in the community and in the workplace. It has a research component which provides students with an introduction to research practices and allows them to make links
between research and teaching through evaluating educational programmes. Through this programme students are exposed to how knowledge is constructed, and how ideas about knowledge is changing and located differently in diverse cultures, settings and personal histories.

Together with these changes a new module on Professional and Policy studies is offered as there was a consciousness to include the changing roles and identities of adult educators as Education Training and Development Practitioners (ETDP) as framed in new policy legislation of the South African Qualifications Framework Authority and the National Qualification Framework (SAQA and NQF) (Millar, 1997, pp.326). ‘Because the identity and role of the ETDP was frequently gained through activism rather than academic study pre-1994 many adult educators operated without formal accreditation’ (McCun in Thomas, 2005, pp.2) therefore we developed the module to mediate their new identities and their changing roles as professionals and how these were linked to global shifts in the construction of knowledge and learning. In addition we included the ideals of lifelong learning and in trying to provide understandings of this concept we link it to issues of democracy, active citizenship and the demands of the economy as well as to those who are the least powerful (Walters and Watters, 2001, pp.471-472). In this way we bring radical and feminist pedagogy into our work.

Thus within a new political context with policy changes in Higher Education which reflected global and local changes, a diverse student body and new curricula brought together informal, non-formal (from development and social movements) knowledge and formal knowledge from the institutionalised sites and sought to validate and analyse the different forms of knowledge through a critical pedagogy and methodology that continuously challenged the given orthodoxy in each site of practice.

Whilst the curriculum design and content seeks to bring together different forms of knowledge and knowledge practices however within the formal context this is constrained as the curriculum is set beforehand and assessment is mostly in written form. We have therefore re-framed assessment practices and allow for forms of assessment that engage students on the journey of consciousness raising. For example we ask students to keep a learning journal and to do classroom presentations, to design educational programmes for both informal and formal sites of practices, to encourage writing we set shorter assignments and encourage them to share their written work. To assist students with their written work we have developed institutional support through our Writing Centre.

In terms of our teaching methodology we aim to make the learning interactive and democratic by acting as facilitators rather than lecturers, we allow for a problem posing methodology and encourage students to raise issues or questions which they are grappling with. We mediate the different theories through small group work and encourage regular dialogue – as our aims are for students to emulate our methodology and actively work in their pedagogical spaces to raise issues of exploitation and injustice, to be self reflective and innovative educators.

**Changing student motivation**

However these changes appear to be insufficient to hold students onto innovative transformation practices and for a number of years there has been a changing pattern in student motivation and choice, characterised by the following shifts:

- A growing demand to study for professionalization/certification and entry into the Masters programme;
- Student choice of curricula is increasingly shifting away from learning in informal
contexts to workplace learning; although students value the experiential methodology they seek a particular method that would allow them to work in situations where the curriculum is standardised, a consequence of working within the NQF in non-formal and formal contexts; students argue for modules which would provide them with specific competencies to become professionals, such as materials developers, assessors, researchers (Thomas, 2005); student drop out has increased and is occurring earlier in the programme.

Below I illustrate some of these shifts as reflected in these quotes taken from student interviews and application forms over a three year period from 2005-2008. The findings presented here are part of a longer term qualitative study which investigates how the ACE programme can be better designed to meet changing student needs and expectations.

The following responses indicate why students have returned to study and chosen this programme:

Contribute to the development of people; Empower myself and others who are disadvantaged; It was a way into the Masters programme, (Thomas, 2005, interviews).

Enhance my teaching practice; Evaluate my own learning and teaching; Entry into the Masters; Enhance management and leadership skill; Requirement for being a service provide; For a better South Africa (from student application forms, 2006-7).

These responses indicate that students’ motives involved a mixture of personal and professional development and societal goals. The findings show that there is an overlap of motivations and that there is a past and future focus. In tracking motivations of the same student cohort through the year I noted that motives can change and are dependent on personal and external factors and that students add on ‘ancillary motivations’ (Scanlon, 2008, pp.23). Motives as the literature suggests (Scanlon, 2008) have a history and can be backward or forward looking where the individual focuses on goals as is illustrated in student responses above. There is an extensive literature on motives which draws on psychological and social theory, this research acknowledges those theories but is framed to draw on an interpretative understanding of motivation. In this sense motives can be seen as expressions, choices of actions based on personal histories and circumstances (Scanlon, 2008). In the South African context this can be read as giving educators a ‘horizon of possibilities’ (Scanlon, 2008, pp.30) as framed in the new democratic dispensation (a better life for all), the NQF and in the discourse of lifelong learning.

Changing nature of the field

A preliminary investigation through interviews and compiling data from student application forms revealed that the reasons for this emerging pattern were:

that many adult educators are under pressure due to policy changes to become certified and register as professional educators;

there is an increased economic imperative to become a professional adult educator;

curricula choice is also in part directed by the new context which emphasises workplace learning;

additional pressures are that educators have to teach increasingly to standardised curricula which meet the requirements of the workplace and their agency and creativity is undermined as the curricula takes no account of basic adult education
principles where the curriculum should be constructed with the learners and to treat learners as citizens and social actors (Martin, 2006);
added to that is the underfunded and insecure nature of employment in the development and social movement sector;
an increased dropout rate can be linked to increased work pressures, lack of institutional financial support and a general increase in family problems such as unemployment and HIV/AIDS;
personal aspirations are taking precedence over more 'social' goals – this can be linked to the recent attainment of citizenship for the majority who now aspire to modernity and its benefits.

Alongside these changes is the situation whereby students and our work (academic staff) is being shaped by neo-liberal forms of governance as South Africa’s economic and political policies follow global trends. These changes are the continuous demands for greater efficiency with decreased funds, focus on skills training and functional literacy, the shift from adult education to adult learning which has placed greater economic and disciplinary responsibility on the learner amidst the promises of lifelong learning which has escaped the large majority of poor, unemployed adults.

In this climate of reduced funding for universities the academy has argued that it cannot make financial aid available to adult learners in spite of a policy of widening access and transformation. The state too in spite of its own policies (White Paper 3, 1997) has not made adult learning a priority in higher education institutions and argued that because adult learners earn an income and are seen as a high risk group. The state has not provided funding for adult learners – this in a country with a high illiteracy rate (35%) and beset with problems of capacity development. The university after much argument made available loan funding but our students did not take up the loans as they are averse to loans as already some of them are in debt just to sustain the household. These developments have a direct impact on the course curriculum, morale of the students and their academic engagement and performance. In addition it also influences the aims and purposes of the programme which are to build the capacity of adult educators to be reflective, to address issues of development and transformation and for educators to interact critically with their learning environment.

**Holding onto transformative practices**

In response to my research question and dilemma of how to ‘hold onto transformative practices’ and questions posed by Martin (2006), I undertook to explore different student motivations and how these were changing as well as how the changing nature of the field impacted on student motivation and implications for the curricula.

From a first set of interviews to investigate what students do value of the present curricula the responses were, ‘valued that my world view was challenged, increased personal confidence, awareness of social issues, being able to share learning, having a foundation of knowledge which I could use in the workplace to argue for changes, be more critical of my teaching practices, cementing my knowledge, connecting theory to practice, learning about globalisation, felt less threatened at work and began questioning management styles, ensured career mobility, enjoyed the different personalities and perspectives of the learners on the programme’ (Thomas, 2005).

These responses reflect some of the aims and objectives of the programme and confirm
that we need to continuously allow students to reflect on the goals of adult education -
goals that are critical of dominant ideologies and ‘teaching defiance’ (Newman, 2006) to
return them to goals of economic and social redress. But I think we need to bend the
dominant approaches further by engaging students to negotiate the curriculum with us and
by allowing students to explore different forms of assessment such as drama, poetry,
visual media, and fictional writing – as this will allow students to see that their experience
and knowledge goes beyond the classroom and the academic programme.

In her book- Teaching to Transgress – bell hooks (1994, pp.13) names the co-construction
of pedagogy ‘engaged pedagogy ‘ and urges teaching staff ‘to share an intellectual and
spiritual growth with students’. She exhorts that theory in itself is not liberatory and that it
only fulfils this function when we claim theory as revolutionary practice. She asks us to
return to feminist practices - to construct theory from grounded experience and in this way
to renew and advance theory and struggles of social movements. Her writing reinforces
the value of popular principles of adult education i.e. to start the curriculum with the
experiences of the learner.

We will also continue to advocate and campaign for financial aid for poor students who
mostly come from NGOs and social movements. Some of our students who work as
educators for trade unions which organises contract workers are in the same precarious
employment situation as their constituencies and earn about R3000 per month (200
pounds). Some students have received funding from the Institute for International
Cooperation of the German Adult Education Association (DVV).

This generous support from DVV makes it possible to build more links with funders and
directors of NGOs and social movements to allow for greater exposure of our programmes
and to build an adult education network and possibly a movement. In these networks
different interpretations of what is knowledge and different practices are shared and on
these platforms students can start to value their own knowledge and learn to value
different forms of knowledge from the informal and formal context. I think it is in these
spaces that they can begin to argue confidently that knowledge ‘from below’ has
significance and educators can use their agency to link experiential knowledge with theory
to create a constant cycle of theory and praxis. The academic staff can ‘play a role to
advance collective social knowledge and strengthen its self-critical nature by allowing it to
contest with other knowledges in the Academy’ (Buchler et al., 2007, pp.11) and argue for
learning to be part of the process of social change.

We should also continue to campaign for widening access and participation for adult
students in Higher Institutions. I think perhaps we should have a slogan that says, ‘20% of
the universities’ students should be working class adults with financial support’ in particular
students coming from social movements and trade unions and those who are not
supported by their workplaces. This campaign would be consistent with the purposes of
Higher Education as spelled out in the White Paper 3 (1997). We can revive the initial
arguments i.e. that adults need to move from the margins of the Academy and be visible
and that their accumulated experience and professional development is a moral, political
and economic imperative for the development of the country (Buchler et al., 2007).

Whilst Wildermeesch (et al., 1998) argue that we need to encourage adult educators to
participate in adult education as ‘social responsibility ‘ and Von Kotze (1998, pp.162-163)
beseeches us to reflect on past achievements and strengths of the adult education
movement during the liberation struggle and suggests, in depth reflections of how past
practices generated learning in multiple sites. She argues that past practices could be
usefully employed in social reconstruction and economic growth programmes.

My initial findings show that within this student cohort several motivation orientations are present and are linked to the changing field and broader context. Students’ varied and complicated needs and aspirations must be affirmed and acknowledged. Thus a more nuanced idea of learning in the South African context is needed as the passionate and self-sacrificial practices and revolutionary ideals witnessed in the liberation struggle and the first years of democracy are not easily replicable.

Thus in response to student motivations and aspirations and taking account of the neo-liberal context which has so much uncertainty, radical pedagogies must include the political and social history of the actors and cannot stand outside their context. In this context adults embrace further learning opportunities that will improve their competencies, life choices and social transformation.

Therefore I think that radical adult educators in the Academy must recognise personal aspirations as a motivation and accommodate it as a topic into the teaching programme and link the conversation with building a better society based on different values.

**Conclusion**

So far the findings of the study and student behaviour represent a brief and complex snapshot of adult learners’ motivations. The research has indicated how these link to the changing field as well as the new political and global context and has provided some insight into how to hold onto innovative transformative practices for adult educators.

To further strengthen transformative pedagogy we should heed Von Kotze’s (1998, pp.172) call that ‘what is required for adult education in South Africa is to articulate its purpose and values clearly in current civic, economic and cultural time spaces within local-global tensions’. As during this time in South Africa there is much political insecurity and economic distress for the majority. In the absence of a radical adult education movement which is linked to other global or local social movements it is difficult for adult educators to harness alternative pedagogies that question the state’s intervention in and response to adult education and social development.

Finally, the goal of holding onto innovative transformative practices must be to ‘offer something of concrete value to students’ intellectual and professional growth, to invite students to become conscious of exploitative realities ‘(Essof, 2004, pp.8). In taking that step we strive to change their understanding of the world, ‘to develop a democratic and activist approach to teaching’ (Foley, 2001, pp.76) and to be passionate, idealistic and engaged adult educators on the side of social justice.

**References**


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**Notes**

1 This phrase was adapted from email correspondence with Professor Shirley Walters and Linzi Manicom.

2 A survey questionnaire will be posted to about 50 employers who send and sometimes sponsor students on the ACE course. The questionnaire’s purpose will be to establish their reasons for choosing this qualification for their staff, their expectation of the course and the influence of adult education policy and or economic issues on educational practices in the workplace.

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