Selectivity, historical memory and truth: Majoritarian stories and the construction of adult education knowledge

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In this paper I argue that adult education history has maintained a racialist as well as sexist bias in the provenance of historical knowledge about the field. Drawing on critical race theory and critical educational history scholarship, I review selected adult education histories and query their absence in dominant narratives about adult education theory and practice. Based on this analysis I draw several conclusions about the construction of the adult education knowledge.

Educational historians, with rare exception, have found themselves on the margin of educational discourse and debate. No less is the case for historians of adult education and learning. On the one hand it would seem that this is only natural since education itself is an applied field where questions of contemporary urgency predominate. On the other hand a well defined historical narrative helps provide legitimacy to a field of professional practice. Stubblefield (1989) makes this plain when he argues that adult educators can learn from history in ways that expand perspective and deepen judgment about contemporary issues. Law appears (1988) to agree declaring that ‘We read history to make sense of the world we live in today’ (p. 37). Apart from debates about the professional status of the field, the historical memory of the field, the result of historical references and research, plays a vital role in framing adult educators’ understanding of the field and its development.

Histories of education go beyond the mere telling of chronological narrative. Historians of education usually write in a way that reflects a style of thinking, a way of understanding or knowing about a field in its depth and breadth. Because of the tension between history of education as a study of the past and the contemporary press of educational problems for educators, educational historians usually strive for a discursive balance by writing both about the past and while addressing pressing current issues. They do so by emphasizing historical study knowing (Donato and Lazerson, 2000). It is this fundamental role of historical research, to help adult educators see issues more clearly and
critically that requires educational historians to reject what Chase (1996) has referred to as ‘scientific historical scholarship’ (p 56) in favor of a more critical analysis of educational development.

The telling of history

The critical tenor of American adult education history reached its zenith in the 1980s and 1990s. Adult education historians influenced by neo-Marxist (Hellyer, 1989), feminist (Thompson, 1975) or Afrocentric (Colin, 1989) theoretical lenses adopted a revisionist view of American adult education—one that sought to challenge the earlier celebrationist histories that were predominate in graduate study (e.g., Knowles, 1994; ). Despite the critical turn in historical study, the telling of history is fundamentally a selective and interpretive enterprise. It is the character of that selectivity that undermines history’s ability to provide inclusive perspective and depth and judgment. In other words, history told from a ‘majoritarian’ (Yosso, 2005) perspective ignores fundamentally important issues of structured inequality, power, privilege and domination that shape the educational experiences of adults. Dominant (his)stories conceal or redefine discordant social relations and power disparities in ways that produce mythic narratives of development, progress, and social good. Histories of subordinate groups, by their very telling, undermine and otherwise contradict majoritarian histories. Delgado (1989) says: The stories of outgroups aim to subvert that ingroup reality. In civil rights, for example, many in the majority hold that any inequality between blacks and whites is due either to cultural lag, or inadequate enforcement of currently existing beneficial laws - both of which are easily correctable. For many minority persons, the principal instrument of their subordination is neither of these. Rather, it is the prevailing mindset by means of which members of the dominant group justify the world as it is, that is, with whites on top and browns and blacks at the bottom. (p. 2413)

Only in the past two decades have American adult education historians begun to tell the stories of marginalized groups in order to extend adult education knowledge and experience (e.g., Colin, 1989; Peterson, 1996; Schied, 1993; Burnette, 2007). However, this telling, as important a first step as it is, remains a marginal discourse in terms of the development of the field and its major ideas. The literature recognizes the importance of experiential learning, critical reflection, radical education, popular education as part of the broad critical educational discourse. Yet the literature virtually ignores the intellectual contributions of Du Bois ( Guy & Brookfield, 2006; Du Bois 1936), Washington (Denton, 1994), Woodson (2000). This is a critical matter, however, because it is in the historical memory of what the field is that constitutes its central core and identity. In light of this, two problems present themselves given the role and character of historical study. First, majoritarian histories, are histories that exclude the narratives of the marginalized and oppressed group experience, are
excluded from the historical record in ways that distort the quality and character of historical knowledge about adult education as a field of study and practice. Second, when histories are written to represent the experiences of excluded groups, the preponderance of scholarship essentially ignores or minimizes that experience.

Chase (1988) notes that ‘Historians of AE, however, have been largely unresponsive to new moods in historical research. Power relations, gender relations, and adult learning outside ‘the canon’ have been alike ignored’ (p 33). When the narratives of excluded groups are omitted or overlooked, the field, its very conception and definition is distorted.

A selection of historical examples

Two examples are offered from the American context. A selection of these examples is based on their prominence in the literature on black education. Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois are both well known for their contributions to education. Both figures are well researched within the literature Black studies. And while both men have been researched in the history of adult education literature, neither is frequently cited with respect to their general theoretical contributions. In what follows below, I provide a brief overview and description of their work and important ideas as they relate to the field of Adult education.

Booker T. Washington and extension-based demonstration model of adult education

Washington, a former slave, and race man of the late 19th and early 20th century is best known for his Tuskegee Institute model of industrial of education. Denton’s historical analysis provides ample detail of the way in which the Washingtonian model of education was conceptualized in a way to respond to the specific needs of rural, black poor farmers in the Jim Crow South following reconstruction in the 1880s and 1890s. Starting with virtually nothing Washington built a post secondary institution of higher learning was a 19th century example of what later came to be popularized as ‘andragogy’. In his autobiography, Washington wrote:

It was not and is not a mere educational task. Anybody can teach boys (sic) trades and give them an elementary education. Such tasks have been done since the beginning of education. But this task had to be done with the rawest of raw material, done with the civilization of the dominant race, and so done as not to run across race lines and social lines that are the strongest forces in the community. It had to be done for the benefit of the whole community. It had to be done, moreover, without local help, in the face of the direst poverty, done by begging, and done in spite of the ignorance of one race and the prejudice of another. (p 7)
This quote provides some sense of the tremendous challenges Washington faced in building Tuskegee. The point I wish to draw out is that Washington was keenly aware and sensitive to the social context in which his educational program was to occur. The Jesup Wagon and the Movable School was model innovations, in the tradition of correspondence learning and demonstration methods.

Denton also describes the development of the demonstration method and extension in Washington’s Industrial Model that preceded by nearly 20 years the institution of extension in the Smith Lever Act in 1914. And further, she provides a photograph (p 171) of the Jesup wagon was used to go out to instruct local farmers. In this discussion Denton asserts that Washington develops the idea of andragogy, though not using that term, based on the meeting of learners needs in social context and drawing upon the experiences of learners to enhance or extend learning. There is a virtual absence in the adult education literature on the development of a model of adult education and learning owing to Washington’s work at Tuskegee. Virtually no work of adult education learning theory addresses Washington’s model that, according to Denton, shares many features of Lindeman’s ideas about adult education and learning which themselves are precursors of Knowles.

**Du Bois and socialist adult education**

W. E. B. Du Bois was a complex and dynamic figure whose life reflects an ongoing analysis and adjustment to the evolving American racial, political, and economic scene. Most well known for his *Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois actually formulated a statement to serve as a foundation for adult education in the mid 1930s (Guy and Brookfield, in press). This recently introduced statement is well known in Black Studies circles but is virtually unknown in adult education circles.

In 1933 and 1934, a period in which he was seriously reformulating his ideas about race, democracy, and justice, he began writing a major piece titled ‘The Negro and Social Reconstruction’ which reflected the influence of Marxism on thinking. By 1935 he had clarified his own thinking to regarding a concrete plan for race progress and equal justice for Blacks through political activism, group solidarity, and community involvement through education. The timing was perfect for the invitation extended to him by Alain Locke to contribute to the Bronze Booklets series.

Central to his plan was his idea of a Negro creed was that it would be used by adult education groups in the black community to critically analyze social and economic conditions in the depression era that affected Blacks. In *Dusk of Dawn* Du Bois writes “that economic program of the Negro which I believed should succeed, and implement the long fight for political and civil rights and social equality which it was my privilege for a quarter of a century to champion” (p. 319). In the paper, Du Bois detailed the conditions of the Black community under
the New Deal programs. His intention was to give a detailed account of social and economic conditions from the perspective of Marxist theory. This essay included eleven statements that comprised a program for racial and economic justice and which included the important role of adult education groups among Blacks to accomplish this purpose. While the paper was never published in the curriculum series commissioned by Locke, the statement remains a significant statement of adult education for social justice commensurate with the ideas of Horton comprised four statements summarizing the current condition of the Negro race followed by an eleven-item Basic American Negro Creed. Eschewing integration and political activism Du Bois made clear the framework for his thinking:

5. We believe that the labor force and intelligence of twelve million people is more than sufficient to supply their own wants and make their advancement secure. Therefore, we believe that, if carefully and intelligently planned, a co-operative Negro industrial system in America can be established in the midst of and in conjunction with the surrounding national industrial organization and in intelligent accord with that reconstruction of the economic basis of the nation which must sooner or later be accomplished.

6. We believe that Negro workers should join the labor movement and affiliate with such trade unions as welcome them and treat them fairly. We believe that Workers’ Councils organized by Negroes for interracial understanding should strive to fight race prejudice in the working class. (321)

The adult education program essentially was one aimed to meet the material needs of Blacks how suffered from lack of employment opportunity, social segregation and political disenfranchisement, and terrorism. Clearly viewed as radical by the liberal oriented American Association for Adult Education (AAAE), Du Bois’ manuscript was excluded from the final production of the Bronze Booklets series. Nevertheless, existence provides evidence of the struggle for the promotion of radical education, situated in ‘Black’ Socialism.

Discussion

These examples illustrate a historical amnesia that frames the construction of historical knowledge of the field. While much theorizing in the field takes advantage of cross disciplinary knowledge, few researchers, other than women or researchers of color who access knowledge in feminist studies or ethnic, black studies, explore the experiences, models, or theories of education developed by black activists and educators. the embedded racism in adult education historical scholarship such that sees the experience of excluded groups as interesting or exotic but bereft of any theoretically valuable knowledge.
Twenty years ago it might be said that little formal research existed in the field to allow for the synthesis of black knowledge into the field. The same might also be said of feminist knowledge. Yet the proportionality of feminist compared with ethnic, racial, or even class based experience and knowledge is very much out of balance with the availability of work in each area. Plainly said, Black knowledge is overlooked, forgotten, or ignored. While contemporary debates often center on the way power relations shapes adult education and learning, few references exist in authoritative texts to the critical perspectives among black educators. The cases of Washington and Du Bois are but two among many examples that might include Nannie Helen Burroughs, Fannie Coppin, Septima Clark, or Carter Woodson. Research approaches that attempt to reveal, understand, and respond to unequal power relations could benefit from the knowledge bases of African Americans. Yet, the literature seems not to acknowledge this tradition even as more research reveals the range of experience and theory in adult education.

The importance of intentionally extending and synthesizing historical scholarship concerned with questions about power, race, class, GLBTQ and/or gender among others is a centrally important to shaping contemporary understanding of the field as well as shaping its future direction. The process by which adult education knowledge is constructed is centered on dominant interpretations of the field which require interrogation in order to reveal the power relations embedded in the construction of historical knowledge.

Conclusion

A general conclusion is taken from the foregoing. First, adult education discourses are remarkably resistant to synthesis and integration of historical knowledge relating to Blacks and other people of color. The uses of historical knowledge, reflection, and projection are vitally important to the construction of the field. Second, support for and publication of focused histories of marginalized groups is a challenge that impinges on the wide dissemination and integration of adult education knowledge. The central argument in the paper is that the construction of adult education knowledge embeds racialist and sexist themes that mask both the extent and character of adult education theory and practice.

Several recommendations are made to extend and integrate historical knowledge of excluded groups. There is a need for scholars of color and others to continue to produce theoretically rich and historically situated knowledge of marginalized groups. Second, meta histories and educational historiography should focus on integrating and synthesizing historical narratives to provide a richer tapestry of adult education knowledge.
References


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