Teaching adult education history in a time of uncertainty and hope.

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A recurring and common criticism within adult education is that it has lost its way, forgotten its original purposes or mission, or become compromised by its uncritical service to business and its embrace of the market. Michael Welton wrote in 1987 that a paucity of scholarly analysis, a separation from activist involvement and adult education’s respectability was at the root of ‘our unease and professional restlessness’. Soon after, Jack Mezirow (1991) challenged American adult education’s ‘faded visions’ and Michael Collins (1991) lamented the crisis associated with an obsession with technique and vocationalism. Phyllis Cunningham’s call to ‘get real’ in 1993 and her later contention that adult education was becoming more complicitous with private business and industry (1996); Jane Thompson’s *Open Letter* naming how managerialism and corporatisation had permeated adult education (1993); Matthias Finger and Jose Asun’s (2001) cry that at the turn of the century adult education was at ‘a crossroads’, and Mike Newman’s (2007) reminder of the importance of teaching choice and defiance in a time of war, all reflect an ongoing questioning about the purpose and future of adult education.

They lament a condition in stark contrast to the feisty beliefs of adult education’s possibilities expressed by educators among the 18th and 19th century Corresponding Societies, Chartists and Plebs League, of Thomas Hodgkin and others who contrasted the idea of ‘really useful knowledge’ to the prevailing idea of ‘useful knowledge’; of the optimism of Americans such as Eduard Lindeman and Myles Horton, and later of Paulo Freire in South America, among others.

Today times have changed again and new conditions confront adult education. Over a very short time in 2008 common discourse describing the times we live in moved from new times, modern times, interesting times (Kalantzis and Cope) to disturbing times, challenging times, momentous times (IJLLE). By the end of the year as stock markets threw up unprecedented collapses, the political climate, at least in the USA, shifted to one of hope. It serves to remind us that change can and does occur quickly and dramatically, that history is dynamic and that having an appreciation and theory of history is invaluable.
This paper takes up the theme of really useful knowledge in a changing world from the standpoint of the teaching of adult education history to post-graduate students. Few understand the specific social contexts of the foundations of adult education in different places, or the genealogy of its current manifestations. Examining these different contexts, traditions, practices and practitioners can enable students to better locate themselves, connect with different traditions, understand the past and position themselves for their future.

Secondly, the paper considers the idea of locating oneself in the context of a rapidly changing political economy that has emerged as a result of the global financial crisis and the international recession that has already taken hold and which is expected to deteriorate during 2009 and 2010, and which calls into question a number of orthodoxies and certainties of the neo-liberal worldview that have come to permeate education and adult education.

**Adult Education - a continuing purpose?**

University adult education in English speaking countries is undergoing considerable change as departments close, are merged into larger faculties or ‘re-engineered’.

In the United States seventy-four institutions had adult, continuing and community education departments but tightening budgets and shifting priorities resulted in the number of institutions offering adult education degrees decreasing by 29 percent between 1992 and 2002 (cited in Glowacki-Dudka and Helvie-Mason 2004, 8). In the United Kingdom a study of Masters degrees in adult education revealed that twenty-six universities were offering postgraduate qualifications in various adult and continuing education fields (Field et al 2005). Similarly in Australia the number of universities offering adult education qualifications has contracted. Some closures are forced by higher education administrations, some however occur with the acquiescence or agreement of adult educators. The search for new fields in professional learning, communication, cultural studies, health or workplace learning can appear to offer fresh fields and an escape from adult education’s perennial problem of its marginalisation within the academy.

Adult educators make a range of claims about its history and the special role and purpose it plays. Among these are that the first adult educators were popular educators and that adult education’s defining purpose is to support democracy and social change; others aim to assist adults achieve self-actualisation, or concentrate on preparing adult learners for work and see it as developing human and social capital; while others say adult education provides a second chance at education, especially in the fields of literacy and numeracy, and in underdeveloped economies.
How might we understand the claims made for adult education in the early 21st century against earlier claims? Is it still a force for social or radical change or has it been conscripted to deliver at one end of the labour process a flexible and adaptable workforce, and at the other a reflexive professional caste? Can we even say there is a role for adult education or indeed that the term continues to have a particular meaning?

The dramatic changes ushered in by the global financial crisis of late 2008 raise new questions about adult education’s purpose. For teachers of adult educators they also raise questions of how a theory or understanding of history might help to understand these changes, what they mean and what impact they might have on politics, economics, work and education. Here the concept of ‘really useful knowledge’ can assist.

If ‘really useful knowledge’ was a term used in the 19th century to develop a critical understanding of self and society and which was of direct relevance to the struggle for social justice, what might it look like today?

Really useful knowledge today
The idea of really useful knowledge developed in nineteenth century England among radical working class associations. It stood in direct contrast to the idea of useful knowledge, that is, the instrumental knowledge needed to get on, versus the type of knowledge to act upon, analyse, challenge and change the existing conditions (Johnson 1979; Thompson 1997).

Education was not directed at politics for its own sake, but instead directed at ‘producing political understanding that will ultimately enable transformations in the material conditions of the working classes which will free them from exploitation’. Essential to this approach was an understanding that education was the province of independent organisations independent from the state, or church or the ruling class. It was self-instruction connecting education to the political process and to self-management of working class institutions. According to Thomas Hodgkin ‘Men had better be without education than be educated by their rulers’ (Lloyd and Thomas 1998, 83, 103).

Aronwitz and Giroux (1985, 157) identified three points of analysis that provide a continuity between the idea of really useful knowledge today and earlier times. Firstly, it provided the basis for critique of dominant forms of knowledge. Secondly, it strongly valued the development of curricula and pedagogies that begin with the problems and needs of those groups that such education was designed to serve, and thirdly it argued for knowledge that contributed to strategies for changing forms of domination while simultaneously pointing to more democratic forms of active community.

Financial crisis, hope and change
Two events dominated the world’s attention in the second half of 2008 both of which will have long term effects. The first was the rapid plunge of the world financial system, which is sucking into it the surrounding economy, and the second, was the extraordinary surge of hope that accompanied the election of Barack Obama. Both events break orthodoxies that had come to dominate conventional thinking about politics, the economy and the wider organisation and development of society.

The global financial crisis brings into sharp relief some of the orthodoxies that have underpinned discussions about social provision (education, health, housing, transport and welfare), the organisation of work and on a broader terrain globalisation; and most importantly have been widely accepted in much adult education writing, management and research. These orthodoxies, which can now be seen to be unreliable, include that:

- the market is the most efficient allocator of goods and services, with an over-riding discourse that there is no alternative;
- globalisation is the product of some sort of natural development driven by technological innovation and removed from and unrelated to human agency;
- the economic role of the state is superseded by large corporations which have become more powerful than nations, and that as a result the state acts at the behest of corporations;
- governments should vacate the economic field wherever possible and only act to provide a floor or safety net for the most marginalised, or in certain areas of the economy such as defence and security, and in limited ways in education and health;
- government spending, and particularly deficits, is a source of economic drain on an economy.

Now the conventional wisdom is shattered. In response to the crisis central banks have been doing everything they previously described as destructive and likely to wreck the economy by generating debt and inflation. The only entity big enough to stand in the market and buy the $US700bn debt obligations of the US-global finance institutions was the US government. In the UK Martin Wolf writing in a Financial Times special on the ‘future of capitalism’ wrote, ‘Another ideological god has failed. The assumptions that ruled policy and politics over three decades suddenly look .. outdated’ (Wolf, 2009).

In particular, the massive bail outs of the largest financial institutions in the world by national governments ranging from the USA, Britain, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Iceland, has meant that failing banks have been effectively nationalised by national governments; the vast stimulus packages introduced by national governments to stimulate demand; and the acceptance by political parties across the mainstream spectrum of the need
for deficit budgets exemplifies the rapid change in what is accepted in the political economy.

The speed of the collapse of institutions was equally spectacular. There are numerous examples but that of Merrill Lynch is indicative. In 2006 the company reported record profits, followed by another record in the first quarter of 2007. Morgenson (2008) argues that either Merrill’s executives did not understand the risks they were taking, or were deliberately looking the other way as investors were making a fortune. However, by the summer of 2007, with defaults rising and the value of the mortgage-backed obligations falling, the magic disappeared, and Merrill reported a $2.3 billion loss. Stanley O’Neal, the chief executive, was forced to leave, but not before taking a $160 million severance package.

None of this happened overnight, nor was the fall solely the result of bad housing (sub-prime) loans issued by greedy banks. During the last quarter of the twentieth century a new system of capital accumulation gradually supplanted the old. Neo-liberalism involved building an intellectual agenda, an economic and political hegemony. It didn’t just emerge but was won through intellectual effort posing new solutions to hard to resolve ‘problems’ (Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich Hayek, and Milton Friedman among others) and delivered by its political midwives Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan.

The effects of neo-liberal redistributive policies and keeping wages down were already evident before the financial crash. When the Dow Jones Index first crossed the 10,000 point mark in 1999; the dot-com boom, it confirmed for many the claim that there was a new weightless economy and we were witnessing the ‘end of history’. Cycles were a thing of the past - even though in the period since 1989 there had been the 1992 recession; the Asian financial collapse; Savings & Loans collapse (1986-91); dot boom bubble burst; Enron, World Com; and now we can add the collapses of Northern Rock, Lehman Brothers, Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, Citigroup, Bank of Scotland among many others.

The long historic trend of the twentieth century where inequality was reducing and improved standards of living were spreading across the populations in the advanced economies slowed from the late 1970s and reversed more recently. In the US the annual Census income survey shows that since 1973, roughly the year when American incomes started seriously polarising, the incomes of the top five percent of households are nearly four times as great as the middle twenty percent and seven times those for the poorest twenty percent. In the past decade the real income of the median household fell every year between 1999, the peak of the 1990s boom, and 2004. In 2008 it was off a total of almost four percent. That’s not as bad as the five percent drop from 1989 to 1993, the period of the first Bush recession and subsequent jobless recovery. Then it took just two years for income to begin
rising after the cyclical bottom, but this time that isn’t and won’t happen (Henwood 2005).

Compensation for corporate executives is the other stark indicator of widening income polarisation. Remuneration for executives in Standard & Poor’s 500 companies in the year before the crash averaged $US10.5 million, or 344 times the average workers’ pay. Three decades ago, the multiple ranged from 30-40. Private equity and hedge fund managers from the top fifty companies did even better averaging annual pay packets of $US588 million each - more than 19,000 times the average workers’ wage (Institute for Policy Studies and United for a Fair Economy, 2008).

The trend is similar across the developed world though with differences. The richer countries can be thought of as falling into three groups:

- The predominantly English-speaking (Australia, Canada, UK, U.S.), which are the most unequal and also have the highest poverty rates (average Gini: 0.322; average poverty rate: 13.8%); and generally have the most minimal welfare states and least regulated economies.
- The continental European countries (France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands), with lower poverty rates and less income inequality (Gini: 0.283; poverty: 9.1%).
- Scandinavian countries (Sweden, along with Finland and Norway), with low poverty rates (average: 6.1%) have the most egalitarian income distribution (gini: 0.272), generous welfare states and high-tech economies nonetheless. (World Bank 2008)

As Randy Newman sang in ‘The World Isn't Fair’:
I’m glad I’m living in the land of the free
where the rich just get richer
and the poor you don’t ever have to see.

*The impact on daily life.*
Effectively challenging the dominance of neo-liberalism requires posing another problem-solving paradigm. The Bank for International Settlements (BIS), the umbrella organisation of the world's national central banks, in its 2008 annual report, released before the rapid collapse of the finance system, headlined its summary as ‘the unsustainable has run its course and policymakers face the difficult task of damage control’. It called attention to the crisis involving more than just the playing out of the US sub-prime crisis, arguing that it will not just be temporary and importantly challenged the popular dichotomy between the ‘financial’ and ‘real’ economies, pointing to the enmeshment of the two.

The real significance of the BIS report is not just that it is an established, reputable institution, nor that it is pointing to the potential severity and
internationalisation of the recession, but that there are no obvious policy settings to rectify the situation. (BIS 2008; Bryan 2008)

The number of lost jobs is rising sharply, consumption and manufacturing output are falling at record rates, house prices keep sliding, and large firms have closed their doors. There is a ‘crisis’ of daily life – stress, over-work, balancing work and family life, rage and depression, and ‘lifestyle’ related ill-health. A question then is why do people go along with the status quo if this is the case? Is it because they don’t believe, or have confidence, that there is any other force in society that can change the status quo for the better? That at work opportunities to ‘have a say’, to be heard, to exercise democracy are almost non-existent. Opportunities to discuss or pose alternative production and investment decisions around social goods, the environment, transport, satisfying work, reducing hours to achieve improved family, community, work balance are seen as fanciful.

The impact of the financial crisis is now spreading like a virus with obvious and less apparent consequences. Officially, 12.5 million Americans are now out of work, compared with 7.4 million a year ago. Three million of those are long-term unemployed that is out of work for at least 27 weeks. The United Nations has revised its 2009 global economic growth forecast down sharply believing that the world economy will contract by 2.6 per cent, which could push unemployment past the 50 million mark. (UN 2009)

But there are other statistics that show the toll that unemployment, foreclosures and evictions, and dramatic drops in stock prices take on daily lives. Harvey Brenner, a sociologist and public health expert at Johns Hopkins University, studies the social costs of economic fluctuations. He has found a direct correlation between economic downturns and an increase in suicide and suicide attempts, heart attacks, domestic violence, child abuse, and murder, even estimating how many more deaths, suicides, heart attacks, homicides, and admissions to mental hospitals can be expected when unemployment rises. Brenner concludes that those affected aren’t a subset of dysfunctional people but mostly normal people reacting to difficult times (cited in Dreier 2009).

Conclusion
Despite the dent in neo-liberalism’s armour much education policy continues as though nothing has changed. The same drive to impose standardised frameworks and to tie ever more tightly and narrowly the link between work and education continues.

What do adult education students need to know today? What is really useful knowledge in today’s context? Being able to make connections with change and upheaval, inequality, policy prescriptions that continue to reflect neo-liberal hegemony is enhanced by making connections with the history and
traditions of adult education practice and theory. This is especially the case for students moving into the field of adult learning from areas such as health, community work; in faith work; social movements; from other disciplines of psychology, communications, human resources, the arts; and from other countries. Ideally this will involve what Bonnie Thornton Dill (2009) calls ‘intersectional studies’, which analyse how multiple social categories, with class as the pivotal point in that intersection, work together.

In considering what is really useful knowledge in the context of crisis and remembering the past in order to critique the present it’s worth recalling the words of Eduard Lindeman who in 1926 wrote:

Adult education will become an agency of progress if its short-term goal of self-improvement can be made compatible with a long-term, experimental but resolute policy of changing the social order. (Lindeman, 1926, 105).

References
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Wolf M (2009) Seeds of its own destruction, Financial Times, 8 March,

Endnote
i. In June 2009 the index is at 8,400
ii. The Gini index (a number between 0 and 1) is one of several statistics used to summarise the course of income distribution over time, or to compare it across countries. If a society were perfectly equal, its Gini index would be 0, and if it were perfectly unequal (one person had all the income) it would be 1. In the real world, the Gini usually falls between .25 (the Swedish neighbourhood) and .50 (the Brazilian neighbourhood). In the US the Gini index for households was .466 in 2004, which was the highest since the early 1940s (World Bank)

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