Learning to challenge time in adult education: a critical and complex perspective

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Paper presented at the 40th Annual SCUTREA Conference, 6-8 July 2010, University of Warwick, Coventry

Learning to challenge time as a ground for social critique
Revisiting the history of adult education to better envision its present and its future requires the adoption of a diachronic perspective. Such a point of view is based on the assumption that reflecting on the temporality of a phenomenon (the development of a theory, an individual or an organization, etc.) constitutes a privileged resource to critically evaluate its grounds. Considering the accelerated pace of life, the hegemony of the ‘extended present’ (Nowotny, 2004) and the ‘decline of anticipation’ (Boutinet, 2008) characterizing Western society, a valuable reflection on time constitutes however a challenging process, which seems more difficult to implement in the early 21st century than before. How is adult education affected by the struggles and the ‘scarcity of time’ that learners, educators and researchers experience when time is needed to reflect critically on their work and their actions? What does it mean to promote critical reflection, teach critical thinking or learn to challenge power dynamics if the temporal dynamics of everyday life seem incompatible with the temporality of critical reflection itself?

The idea of critique has evolved through time. Philosophical, theological, literary, and social critiques have been shaped by the history of human cultures (Alhadeff-Jones, 2007, 2010b). Current ecological concerns around our natural environment may be their latest expression; however developing ‘sustainability’ is fundamentally a temporal issue (Alhadeff-Jones, 2010a). At the core of this paper remains the conviction that a new stage in the history of social critique may emerge from the need to preserve not only our physical environment, but also the temporal ecology to which we belong (Grossin, 1996). Beyond climate crisis, we have to face today a more invisible form of pollution. Virilio (1995/2008) calls it ‘dromospheric pollution’ (from the Greek dromos, meaning a race, running) referring to a loss of appreciation for the vastness and qualities of space – as protected intervals of time, delay, relief between events and actions. As summarized by Purser (2002, p.160), the time required for sound human judgment, communal reflection and deliberation – relief necessary for making sense of the world – is not available anymore: ‘[…] dromospheric pollution, if left unabated and unregulated, will lead to a sharp loss of cultural memory and a degradation of collective imagination.’

Following a perspective inspired by the paradigm of complexity (Morin, 2008) and current contributions to the French-speaking field of adult education (Pineau, 2000; Lesourd, 2006; Les Temporalités éducatives, 2006), this paper argues the necessity to challenge the ways time is apprehended in adult education, in order to not only respect but also explicitly promote the heterogeneity of meanings associated with
this notion. Beyond the instrumental and reductive conceptions of ‘time management’, it suggests considering projects such as ‘chronoformation’ (Pineau, 2000) as a new form of critical pedagogy. This paper suggests in particular that the development of a theoretical framework focusing on time would enrich existing critical traditions in adult education. Based on a previous research on the multireferentiality of the idea of critique (Alhadeff-Jones, 2007, 2010b), it invites the readers to explore what could constitute the critical aim of educational theories and practices focusing specifically on the value of learning to discriminate, evaluate, interpret, argue, judge, and challenge phenomena involving explicitly a reflection on time, as it can be experienced by adult learners based on their own personal and professional experiences.

Learning to discriminate time and rhythms

As suggested by Pomian (1984), the presence of qualitative times (historical, psychological, religious, political, social, etc.) and quantitative ones (astronomical, atomic, clocks, etc.) reminds one of the importance not to reduce this concept to one privileged form. The reality of time is grounded in change, and the reality of change contributes to its diversity (rotation of the Earth around its axe, disintegration of specific atoms, history of a country or an institution, development of an organism, etc.) The object designated by the word ‘time’ involves changes, real or represented, realized by an instance producing signals or signs. Because, such changes may express a form of regularity, they suggest also the presence of rhythms (movements, regular beat, cadence, measure, etc.) characterizing what is flowing (Sauvanet, 1996).

If some forms of temporalities are obvious, due to the prevalence of the changes that constitute them, others remain subtler. In any cases, their perception is matter of learning. Recognizing the presence of multiple and heterogeneous temporalities questions therefore the way one learns to discriminate the succession of lived or observed changes and repetitions, as well as the rhythms they may express. Considering through various levels of observation the ways rhythms are learned – and recursively learning is paced – suggests that one recognizes the biological, psychological, psycho-social, social, cultural and political determinants that shape – among others – their temporalities.

From a theoretical perspective, several questions emerge: How does one learn to discriminate the rhythms constitutive of one’s own life temporalities? How does one learn to apprehend the structures, repetitions and movements they are made of? Discriminating the multiple expressions of time requires the development of a capacity to feel, acknowledge, recognize and identify the specificities and the influence of rhythms shaping the everyday experience (Lefebvre, 1992/2008). Among them: Natural rhythms, such as circadian and seasonal ones; urban rhythms shaped by man-made environments (e.g., architectural design, transportation system, etc.); internal rhythms remaining often unconscious or subconscious (e.g., biological ones, such as functional rhythms, sleep, meals, fitness, periods, etc.); personal and interpersonal rhythms shaping behaviors, verbal and non-verbal interactions; social rhythms (e.g., the rhythms of religious, economical, political institutions); cultural rhythms (e.g., linguistic, technological and artistic ones).

Learning to discriminate rhythms involves therefore the capacity to recognize and
identify synchronicities and asynchronicities, as the expression of the cohesive and conflicting nature of individual and collective temporalities.

Learning to evaluate time and rhythms
From childhood to adulthood, everyone learns to assimilate and develop means required to keep track, examine and evaluate individual and shared temporalities: Reading clocks, calendars and schedules, describing the history of a country or an institution, keeping a journal, writing a story, or an autobiography. Mankind has developed numerous ways to do so. Pomian (1984) distinguishes thus the development of chronographical, chronometrical and chronological means. Chronography (chronicle and story) focuses on present time and conceives it as qualitative and discrete, based on a simple relationship of anteriority between events. Unlike the time of a chronicle, which usually records events on a day-to-day basis, a story is grounded in a continuous temporality, referring to the life of a person, a family, an institution, or a group (ibid.) Chronometry represents time through the indications associated with calendars or instruments of measure (sundials, water clocks, atomic clocks, etc.) Chronometry suggests the presence of a time conceived as both cyclical and symmetric. It is grounded in the possible repetition of a cycle remaining invariant. By contrast with chronography and chronometry, chronological systems embrace long periods of time (centuries, millennia, millions of years, etc.) representing it through series of dates and names, successions of eras and their subdivisions, from an origin to the present time (ibid.)

From a critical perspective, using chronographical, chronometrical and chronological means cannot be taken for granted, for at least two reasons. From a historical, political and social perspective, their use and the values that determine them are never neutral. Among others, the history of clocks and calendars is a history of struggles and conflicts of interests (Attali, 1982). From a psychological perspective, the capacity to represent and evaluate lived temporalities requires also skills that represent significant adaptive and developmental stakes. How does one learn to keep track of lived time? What are the time scales that one learns to read, individually and collectively? How does one learn to examine singularities and repetitions? What are the standards and norms that are assimilated in order to evaluate developmental processes?

Learning to interpret time and rhythms
The way one learns to interpret the relationships between past, present and future is at the core of any significant adult learning process. In many instances, in order to be transformative, such a learning process requires the reformulation of meanings associated with past and present experiences (Mezirow, 1991). It also requires the development of a capacity of anticipation or projection in the future.

Pomian (1984) defines a chronosophy as a questioning of the future, which claims to find answers to represent it, if not in details, at least through its main characteristics. This generic term covers a large variety of practices and works, referring to different temporal horizons, goals and means to unfold the future. Chronosophies may focus on individuals, groups of people, and humanity as a whole or even the universe. Because it transcends the present toward the future, any chronosophy aims to apprehend as a whole the trajectory of history, evolution or time. A chronosophy aims to replace an incomplete knowledge about evolution by a finite knowledge
highlighting the meaning of everything that is supposed to happen. Therefore, chronosophies are not limited to what is perceived or observed. They are legitimated by various techniques translating the future into an object of knowledge (clairvoyance, divination, astrology, or the formulation of economical and sociological theories, based on the scientific apparatus) (ibid.)

Learning to interpret individual and shared chronosophies involves knowing how to access, express and formulate one’s own personal history and collective memory and how to interpret possible futures. In education in general, and adult education in particular, the use of biographical approaches, life history or oral history has raised many questions about the learning involved in the reinterpretation of the past (West, Alheit, Andersen & Merrill, 2007). This is also true for practices related to personal and professional orientation involving the capacity to elaborate projects and anticipate one’s own development. Whether or not one believes in the persistence of standardized life cycle (Elchardus & Smits, 2006) or acknowledge the challenges associated with the changing patterns of adult life trajectories, learning to interpret the contradictory experiences of short-term and lifelong temporalities remains at the core of contemporary adult development (Alheit, 1994). When, where and how does one learn to build a coherent meaning in order to articulate everyday life and long terms dynamics? What is involved in the learning of anticipation (Boutinet, 2008) and the elaboration of projects?

From a scientific perspective, every learning theory supposes a chronosophy determining the ways researchers and practitioners interpret causal relationships between past, present and future learning. It also involves assumptions about individual and collective development, suggesting for instance the specificity of ages of life and the existence of stages of development (Clark & Caffarella, 1999). Educational chronosophies frame the way one answers the question: When does one learn what, with whom and how? Their existence requires one to question the frames of interpretation they privilege to analyze lived temporalities.

Learning to argue about time and rhythms
Everyone experiences on a daily basis ambivalence and conflicts regarding time. Dealing with time constrains and looking for areas of flexibility, negotiating time for oneself or time dedicated to others, one has to constantly reassess one’s own priorities. From a lifelong perspective, family and professional choices involve questioning temporal alternatives. At home, it supposes discussing the rhythms of life and development of the different family members (Jurczyk, 1998). At work, it supposes the negotiation of explicit schedules, implicit rhythms, cycles of behavior, and cultural norms. It requires one to manage time pressures versus self-fulfillment, short-term contracts versus long-term commitment (Ylijoki & Määttä, 2003), as well as various speeds of life (Eriksen, 2001).

The presence of multiple temporalities challenges the way one conceives their antagonisms and complementarities. Discriminating, evaluating and interpreting time and rhythms involves the learning of a capacity to argue and negotiate the interpretations that legitimize their natures, values, and meanings. At the core of such learning remains the capacity to identify and discuss the role of synchronizer played by specific rhythms. According to Pineau (2000), such learning suggests that one recognizes the basic rhythms having enough influence on other rhythms to
provide them, in part or totally, a measure or a beat. New questions emerge: How does one learn to negotiate the meaning and the influence of antagonistic rhythms? What is involved in the capacity to recognize and privilege specific synchronizers?

**Learning to formulate a judgment about time and rhythms**

According to Jurczyk (1998), strategies to deal with conflicting temporalities vary: Some people adopt ‘management strategies’; others are looking for ‘balance’ or prefer ‘fighting’. Privileging a clinical and psycho-sociological lens, Lesourd (2006) considers that individuals have a ‘temporal self’ (Moi-temps) which, through reflexivity and narration, articulates and contains intertwined temporalities, contributing to the creation of one’s own temporal milieu. Grossin (1996) refers to the notion of ‘personal temporal equation’ to conceptualize what determines the way people balance opposite temporalities.

Because of the simultaneous presence of different ways of dealing and arguing about time, developing a capacity of judgment aiming to position oneself in regard of temporal matters becomes crucial. Considering the multiplicity of lived rhythms, evaluations (chronography, chronology, chronometry) and interpretations (chronosophy) constitutive of one’s own experience of time, learning how to legitimate and balance various forms of temporality represents therefore another critical aspect of lifelong learning. The need to position oneself from a temporal perspective requires therefore the capacity to learn to judge the relevance, the rightness, and the prevalence of specific temporalities in order to consciously decide which ones should be privileged, and according to which principles of justice or equilibrium.

Pineau (2000) believes that individual self-directed learning (*autoformation permanente*) constitutes a privileged space-time for one to learn to operate and formulate such a judgment. Using existing forms of alternance (between work and study, day and night, etc.) may therefore appear as new forms of rhythms facilitating the development of this capacity. In such a process of chronoformation, the use of life history becomes a critical tool in order to help adult learners identifying and building their own self time, through duration and history. Questions emerge: How does one learn to privilege specific temporalities and orchestrate one’s own rhythms? How does one learn to condemn unfair or unbalanced rhythms of life?

**Learning to challenge time and rhythms**

At the core, experiencing the scarcity of time, and the conflicts it involves, is a political matter. As such, not everyone is equally equipped to cope with it. As Jurczyk (1998, pp.290-292) formulates it, considering gendered inequalities regarding temporal experience:

> Having time is one of the main resources for the shaping of society and - in combination with education, wealth, and so forth - translates into structural power. (...) Time - both its availability and its conscious management - has become a component of social inequality. Whoever wins here, wins autonomy and influence.

In addition, deep tensions associated with the experience of time appear as a new form of alienation. Wood (1998, quoted in Purser, 2002) defines ‘temporal alienation’
as the mismatch or discordance between rational / clock time and lived time. Its symptoms include chronic stress, rage, intensified impatience, work addiction, etc. Associated with a sense of urgency which carries pathological consequences, temporal alienation relies on productive forms of discipline that are self-imposed, a cognitive hyperactivity that is immobilized and fixated on the present, as well as defensive reactions to an unknown future (Purser, 2002). Such phenomena have been recently exacerbated by the development of new technologies reinforcing the experience of ‘real time’. However, the experience of time alienation is not new. In 1932, Bachelard (1932, p.106, quoted in Pineau, 2000, my translation) was making the following suggestions in order to unchain temporal constraints:

1) Getting used not to refer one’s own time to the time of others – breaking through the social frames of duration; 2) Getting used not to refer one’s own time to the time of things – breaking through the phenomenal frames of duration; 3) Getting used – difficult exercise – not to refer one’s own time to the time of life… breaking through the vital frames of duration. Then only one gets to the self-synchroné reference [...] Time is no more flowing. It gushes forth.

The heterogeneity of lived or observed temporalities involves the presence of antagonisms, struggles, resistances, and conflicts that shape the nature of the balance between multiple rhythms. Learning to critically cope with them finally suggests the development of the capacity to challenge and put in crisis the temporal frames that shape one’s own everyday experience and long-term perspective. As illustrated by several contemporary initiatives, such as the Slow Food Movement, learning to slow down and privilege alternate rhythms supposes creative strategies. It requires inventing new forms of filter to deal with the flow of experience and information available (Eriksen, 2001). As suggested by Purser (2002), it involves the recognition of the role of participation and imagination in the figuration of temporality. It encourages one to actively explore the diversity of representations of time and experiences of rhythms. Finally, it fundamentally requires claiming the deep complexity and multidimensionality of time, and fighting any attempt to reduce it to simplistic and alienating expressions. From a scientific perspective, describing, explaining and interpreting how one learns to do so remains a field of study almost untouched.

Opening
During the last decades, a particularly rich and fecund academic field – sometimes identified as ‘time studies’ – has slowly emerged in the English-speaking world, revolving in particular around social and human sciences. Aiming to question the nature of our assumptions about time and to understand related phenomena, this field of study revisits and enriches existing contributions – such as those developed throughout the centuries in philosophy, theology, physics, or the arts – to privilege plural forms of interpretation according to disciplinary or interdisciplinary perspectives (Fraser, 1981). Paradoxically, despite an abundant literature related to ‘time’ in the English-speaking educational sciences (e.g., instructional time, time perception, awareness of time and chronology, future time perspective, children’s use of time concept, child and adult developmental theories), the anthropological, social and epistemological bases grounding the way this notion is understood or revisited in adult education remain very rarely questioned in depth. Time is at the
core of any learning but curiously the way it is understood remains often tacit and unchallenged. From a theoretical perspective, it seems crucial today to question our assumptions about time and the way they frame current educational theories and practices. The way time is experienced and represented is shaped by culture and has evolved through history. Today, in spite of a richness of definitions, the way time is interpreted seems to be often simplified. In everyday life, the physical time of clocks dominates the way time is experienced. In order to promote a critical and complex understanding of temporal matters, the reflection proposed in this paper claims that learning to discriminate, evaluate, interpret, argue, judge, and challenge experienced and observed temporalities and rhythms should be at the core of original forms of critical theory and practice in adult education. From now on, one key question remains: How are we going to learn to find time to develop and sustain such theories and practices?

**Bibliography**

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