Against the Grain: Oral Histories from Adult Education Workers in New York City

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Adult education in the United States has had its roots in the struggle for democracy. Early in the twentieth century, adult education was often described as a movement; an effort to build a better world democratically. Education - learning to name the world - was at the center of that movement (Heaney, 2010). This study explicitly situates adult education’s history within a social justice framework, honoring and building on people’s localized truths and complex, fluid realities while also situating that history in a broader political-economic context. Through these narratives, this study explores ways in which students and teachers can redefine and re-negotiate their identities inside and outside the classroom, re-construct human agency, and in the process help to build a social movement with the capacity to effect real change.

Below are the questions which have guided our research:

- What role can narratives play in preserving the field of adult literacy’s original connection to social justice education?
- To what extent can adult education nurture a more democratic world?

The Neo-liberalization of Adult Education

Adult education continues to be a greatly marginalized area of research (Comings and Soricone, 2007). Yet given the dire economic climate in the United States, the education of adults is ever more important. According to the 2003 National Assessment of Literacy Survey, 93 million people in the US are at either basic or below basic levels in prose or quantitative literacy. The 2008 census reports that 44% of the population live below poverty thresholds. 32 million adults, about one in seven, lack the literacy skills to read anything more complex than a children’s book. However, with the passage of welfare reform in 1996, adult education and literacy programs have been forced to function in a climate wherein funding is increasingly
contingent on programs taking on a more instrumentalist approach to learning. The ideology of welfare reform in the U.S. is rooted in the notion that poverty is the result of individual failure, bad choices, lack of initiative. In this context, adult education would come to be measured not by how many engaged citizens it created but by how well it prepared and placed poor and working class women and men for and in positions at the lower end of the labor market (Rivera, 2009; Martin, 2000).

In aftermath of welfare reform adult education has become, neo-liberalized, more attuned to a political-economy that needs low-wage workers with certain “skills”—among them good manners and obeisance to management—than to the ongoing struggle for democracy. In this context, it is increasingly difficult to design, construct, fund, and maintain programs that adhere to the historical values of adult education.

In New York City, publicly funded adult literacy programs (programs funded under the Workforce Investment Act) privilege dominant interests and agendas. Nowhere on funders’ checklist is there acknowledgement that literacy education is connected in any way to social change. (Macedo, 1994). Instead, currently, adult literacy funding is intricately tied to perpetuating and maintaining an army of workers ready to occupy low wage, mostly non-union jobs in the service industry, a sector of the economy that has seen rapid growth over the last 30 years or so. (Stuckey, 1991; Moody 2007). By only recognizing programs’ success in terms of gains students make on standardized tests, an extremely limited and deficit driven definition of literacy is being privileged. E. Peterson (personal communication, September 30, 2008) points out that the system uses numbers inappropriately to maintain itself.

The brief oral histories presented below not only highlight the ways in which funding for literacy programs is now steeped in the broader priorities of neo-liberalism. We hope to preserve the historical memory of a field during a time when financial strain and an inhospitable climate threaten our practice. We also hope to affirm both who we are collectively and who we—along with our students—might become (Nadeau, 1996). One of the main themes that emerge from these histories is the belief that ordinary people, are not simply worth listening to; they are, as Gramsci might have put it, organic intellectuals, with the potential to create the collective power to change not only their communities but society at large. (Gramsci, 1971)

THE STRUGGLE FOR  SOCIALLY TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION
David Greene, an adult educator, taught adult literacy at the Department of Education for many years before retiring. When he began his work in New York City as an adult educator in 1987, he was building off rich experience with community and labor groups in West Virginia. Indeed, “education,” seemed to emerge organically from other kinds of political work:

I actually ’joined the field’ in 1987 when my wife and I moved back to New York City. . . In truth I had worked for many years with adult education and community organizing in West Virginia, between 1967 and 1987. . . I had been to Highlander many times with community leaders and was involved in the Welfare Rights and Black Lung Movements, and the education that was part of those efforts.

As he put it, he “did not choose to become an adult educator, but fell into the New York jobs to support family.”:

It is clear that people’s stories of their experience are a fundamental part of our learning from each other, as teachers and students. There are so many stories of adult students organizing, speaking publicly, developing leadership skills, teaching others (teachers and students)—including many experiences from other communities, countries and cultures. . . The story that a student tells . . . validates and elevates the learning process, the individual and the collective accumulation of experience. This collective aspect serves to broaden the picture of social issues and is basic to empowerment – that we all can see the boat we are in, and potentially what we need to learn and do to change the world. I see literacy campaigns and popular education/particular forms of adult education as important spaces discussions and learning, as tools to understand more, see the broader picture, organize with others and take action for social change. Participation of the working class – poor and working people, I see as fundamental to real democracy. The more I understand, and see my commonality, the more I can contribute my particular strengths and experience to change society.

Furthermore, learning to read the world—the broad, politically purposeful notion of literacy that Freire talked about—transforms the way we, the “educators,” must then see the content of education. As Greene put it:

The lessons of history and development provide knowledge and experience of past efforts. Learning where things came from and how they developed, can
guide our current efforts toward social justice. Ignorance of that history keeps us in the dark as to what is happening today, and about the direction that things are moving. Indeed, the social movements that are so critical to the history of American democracy—most of which contained some educational drive, or component—can form the basis of a curriculum of discovery:

The social movements in the U.S., and world movements for a better world, have a wealth of material for adult education classes. Understanding the past developments in the context of economic, political and social forces is not the exclusive territory of Harvard, Stanford or Oxford. This material is grist for the mill of leadership development and social transformation, using the most illuminating and participatory adult education. Adult education can be the means to move toward a real democracy that we dream about.

Paul Wasserman, an adult literacy activist and leader in NYC, brought to adult literacy his experiences being a taxi driver in NYC in the 1970’s, and also, more formatively, his time teaching in the public schools:

I came into literacy accidentally. I was teaching high school social studies, that was my introduction to teaching. A couple of things happened simultaneously to make me not want to continue teaching in the high school: I was going to start graduate work and I was feeling frustrated by how things were organized. I was drawn to really alternative formats that were interdisciplinary and organized around themes. The public school structures didn't allow for this. All the failures of schools and kids were being blamed on kids. When my friend told me they were looking for a director of a literacy program at one of the CUNY campuses, they were doing exactly what I wanted. I was drawn to teaching in the inner city in part because I wanted to work with that population. It wasn't about literacy but more about thematic content, understanding the literacy component was part of that. When I first started, literacy was more about bringing students into the world of reading and writing. There was a very clear historical reality of underprivileged folks who didn't have much schooling because of social realities. There are a huge number of people in literacy programs who if they'd had interventions or support would have been fine. Still, their experiences were shaped by an
unjust social system but the ways that has impacted people’s literacy is more complex.

John Gordon began his adult literacy work being a teacher-director at The Open Book, a grassroots community based adult education program in Brooklyn, NY. He also came to adult literacy through organizing experience as a rank and file taxi driver in NYC in the 1970’s.

Many of us came into adult education because we believed in the transformative power of adult education, because we believed that learning to read and write would not just open doors for some individuals but had the potential to give students the skills to understand and act on their world more effectively, to gain control over their lives, to act in concert with others to change the conditions of life in their communities. Implicit in this view was a notion that education itself was good, that by learning to read people would be opened up to new experiences and ideas, and in the process become different and perhaps more powerful people. This potential of education; to sponsor and provoke change, rather than the hope that we could help then get jobs (no matter how important that is) is what inspired many of us to become teachers.

As Gordon suggests, in recent years, the political and funding landscape has gone from one in which space could be found to make those connections to one in which that space is increasingly closed off. An important part of the practice of adult literacy programs in this context, then, is the struggle to preserve the connections between literacy and social justice.

Vincent, another long-time activist and practitioner, as well as one of the primary architects of the main public funding source for adult literacy in recent years in New York City, speaks more specifically of the changing funding landscape. When the New York City Adult Literacy Initiative (NYCALI) was founded in 1985 there was a sense of possibility, even if the overall thrust of the program was instrumentalist. As Vincent put it, “it did feel like there was more space for progressive dialogue.” Indeed, Vincent adds, the “first NYCALI proposal included expectations of class sizes, curriculum, and staffing that were all rooted in progressive philosophies.” Even though the program was backed by federal money, which came with some accountability measures,
It just felt great to be able to institutionalize all the coalition work that we’d done for years. We wanted NYCALI to have a strong research component because so much of it really grew out of the community experience and the mission of social justice. In the 1980’s the struggles were more about building capacity that was high quality. In this earlier period of NYCALI, we looked at all the key elements not just the federal accountability measures. We asked: do we have the voices of learners? Are we collaborating across city agencies in ways that are making the best use of the resources? Can we strategically expand the resources that are available in equitable ways? We were constantly asking people, ‘What do you think?’

But now, says Vincent, “that’s much less the case than in the 80’s and even early 90’s.” The government’s broader agenda of data driven accountability has come to determine the agenda for adult literacy programs.

Before, funders and practitioners would talk about how we could make learning relevant to students’ lives. How can that learning be transformational? How does it impact the community in ways that create more equity? Now that has changed. With only part time teachers, the field is weak. Short term funding changes constantly, legislative priorities change, amounts of funding change and programs are chronically underfunded. The implications of these shifting priorities are enormous. The students certainly are marginalized; the practitioners are also marginalized even though they may have been in the field their whole lives. There’s the impact of what the public’s willing to spend money on, how adult learners want to invest their time, the demands and changes in the school system and what that means to parents in terms of the support they need to give their children. Data collection has come more to be seen as an accountability measure, as opposed to informing policy and developing quality practices. The students’ voice at the table and active participation has been totally lost or marginalized.

Vincent adds that the “reform” of welfare in the mid-90s has had a huge impact. Strict adherence to a radically narrowed notion of educational attainment have determined access to funders and moved all emphasis to job market preparation, and not just in terms of “skills,” but in terms of attitude and behavior. And not only that, the “welfare to work” mentality now drives the discourse of adult literacy:
Now there really is no organized access to funders. . . Literacy programs were forced to shift their focus from education to employment. Be on time, listen to your boss, and respect authority (as opposed to a model of empowerment, of community development, of change). Popular education . . ., without sufficient funding, will be marginalized forever. For sure, there is a gap right now. All of programs’ work gets translated into a report card with just four outcomes on it and only one of them has to do with education. None of them have anything to do with the content or purpose of education. Because these report cards may jeopardize funding, they end up driving the discussion, the energy and what few resources are available. We need to continue to push for more meaningful information that really expands the dialogue otherwise we’re left with no ammunition to support the education work that we do and counter welfare reform, immigration policy, and national security priorities. All of these things radically impact how adult education feels nationally. The changes of politics in our state reinforce this and combined with the ongoing marginalization of the field through inadequate funding and a part time workforce, the field is disabled from even advocating. Basically what’s left are individuals who are very much on the margins.

Wasserman seconds the thought.

Because there’s been a disappearance of viable job opportunities, people are coming to programs not from a framework of "I want to learn" but "I need a GED to get a job." There’s a kind of desperation. The motivation is different because people are desperate and getting more so. It’s not a coincidence that adult education funding is now workforce funding. The field is filled with people who are passionate but policy and students are focused on jobs. Now it's become all about outcomes.

The stress on “Outcomes,” data driven outcomes, only drives home the point that programs are increasingly powerless to define for themselves what they are all about and what they, along with the students they serve, are trying to accomplish. And this, despite the fact that many in the field think little of the “outcomes” they produce: . . . people in the field are at the mercy of funders' priorities and other than preserving space for good work and exploring ideas that can support students fighting this climate, the emphasis now is about giving funders the outcomes
even though everyone knows the outcomes aren't based on the reality of what's happening in programs. Unless people say there's something wrong with the whole notion of saying terrain is being defined by funders, we can't change this....and the field can't change this if it's not happening in society. . .

The solution, or perhaps better, the hope, is to get back to basics, says Wasserman: Helping students understand to understand their social realities needs to be more at the heart of what we do. My philosophy is to try to make sense of the world by bringing various intellectual frameworks to mind....that serous political commitments that can help make sense of the world. I guess I believe there's a certain stance of wanting to live what you believe and that defines how you live and the choices you make.

Referring to the notion of “solidarity economics” emerging from the Zapatista movement in Mexico, Wasserman adds:

People are actually being brought into leadership roles. There’s a concerted effort to create a space and commitment for people learning….so the challenge is how to apply that to this context. We need to fight to democratize institutions we're a part of. If we're serious about building a democratic society, we need to be serious about challenging undemocratic practice where we are. I believe leadership can happen where students' lives are grounded. It's more about giving students tools to recognize that the way things are organized can be changed.

CONCLUSION/ IMPLICATIONS

It is urgent and essential for these narratives to be preserved as testament both to the political history of popular education, and to the political nature of the changes popular education, and in particular adult literacy programs, have recently experienced. We are committed to conducting practitioner research in reciprocal ways that honor both the contributions of community knowledge and academic knowledge. We hope to generate, through these oral histories, a dialogue between practitioners, including those situated in the academy, and marginalized communities that then might generate the kind of collective political pressure to transform the
metric that determines adult education funding in the US back toward a more transformational register.

Adult education policy must reflect and be connected to the interests of practitioners (and students) in the field.

Adult literacy programs should be linked with other freedom/human rights struggles that are connected to class, race, gender, and other inequities.

For many, many students adult literacy programs represent a last glimmer of hope at education and at redefining what’s possible in their lives and for us as a society. Our definition of literacy must therefore be kept as broad as possible, yet always linked to context of those who are striving to become “literate.”

References

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