



Reflections

Reflections on AERC 2016: Drawing Tomorrow's Blueprint from Today's Inkwell

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This reflective essay is based on my contribution to the closing panel of the 2016 Adult Education Research Conference (AERC), in which we were tasked to reflect on the conference and share insights on how we draw tomorrow's blueprint for adult education from today's inkwell. My reflections are based on a selection of papers from the conference and the sessions I attended. As it is to be expected, the basis for my comments is selective, partial, and biased toward my interests in the radical adult education tradition, which I define very broadly to include those within the field who are explicitly dedicated to investigating, promoting, and engaging in adult education for progressive, social democratic, or socialist transformation (Holst, 2007). I am cherry-picking concepts, phrases, and ideas I encountered during the conference and relating them to ongoing ideas I hold on adult education and the field. Rather than a focus on the field of adult education as such, I think my comments center on movements for social justice, and on the extent to which the field of adult education can, is, and should be engaged in and be relevant to these movements.

My first phrase from the conference came from Ian Baptiste's opening plenary session, in which he stated: "where there is resistance, there is adult education." I agree. I think a framing question for me, however, would be: While there is most certainly adult education taking place in resistance movements, are there adult educators? In other words, are there people who explicitly see and understand their role as educators in the movements of resistance? If there are not adult educators as such, resistance can wane. To the extent there are adult educators, the resistance can wane or flourish based on the level of understanding held by those adult educators. Therefore, I am arguing three main points here. First, education is central to social movements; I think the scholarship on social movements and adult education makes this evident (e.g., Choudry, 2015; English and Irving, 2015; Foley, 1999). Nevertheless, I would say that this literature tends to focus on learning in social movements, and less on educating in

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social movements. Therefore, my second point is that educators who explicitly see themselves playing an educational role are central to social movements. They may go by different names—leaders, trainers, activists, etc.—but they perform the role of educating the movement. And, lastly, to paraphrase Marx, these educators must also be educated. In other words, movements need educators who have a clear vision of the nature and trajectory of social change (Gonzalez & Katz-Fishman, 2010). As is commonly stated among educators, we cannot teach what we do not know. Therefore, movement educators must have a clear idea themselves about the nature of and prospects for change.

My second concept is contradiction, which I took from the paper presentation by Junghwan Kim, Sunyoung Park, and Jieun You (2016) using Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). They define contradictions as “historically accumulated structural tensions” which are “sources of change and development” (p. 169). I think it is key that we, adult educators, understand the growing contradictions of a socio-political economic nature which we experience as polarization in our economic, political, social, and cultural lives. These contradictions are both the sources and targets of social movements. As the presenters stated, contradictions, and I would say the polarization through which we experience them, are not necessarily negative, but are the way things transform. Polarization is difficult; in the extreme, it is about life and death, but it has also always been that which opens-up the roads to freedom. The US polarized on the question of slavery, and this was part and parcel of what Dubois called the general strike of the slaves in their self-emancipatory action for freedom (Roediger, 2014).

My next phrase comes from the opening session presentation by spoken word artist Melissa Harris. In her performance, she mentioned “The Powers That Be.” I want to relate this to the current situation we find ourselves in and our level of understanding it. To what extent do we understand that the powers that be do not care about us? They want an increasing number of us to go away, to get rid of us. In May of 2016, in response to the mass marches of low-income workers at the restaurant chain’s shareholders’ meeting, the former CEO of McDonald’s, Ed Rensi, said that if workers demand a \$15 per hour wage, they can just be replaced with \$35,000 robotic arms. He went on to say how this automation of labor goes beyond the foodservice sector (Rensi as cited by Limitone, 2016). The powers that be don’t care about us, because increasingly they don’t need us; they don’t need our labor.

Trump can talk about all the walls he wants, but they certainly will not save jobs. We are in a revolutionary period in which one of the main contradictions of capitalism (Allman, 2011)—the contradiction between the forces of production (technology) and the relations of production (the jobs we do to get some income to buy what we need)—is in outright antagonism. We are living in a slow and steadily growing laborless world (Srnicek & Williams, 2015). I do not want to overstate the case here, cognizant of the fact that alarm bells of a world without work have been around for a long time (Rifkin, 1997). I, nevertheless, believe that the contradiction between the forces and relations of production is increasing; the trajectory is set for the expansion of technology at the expense of labor. Political economists are engaged in serious debates on this question (e.g., da Motta e Albuquerque & Callinicos, 2016) and its revolutionary implications (e.g., Davis, Hirschl, & Stack, 1997; Srnicek & Williams), which should be of great interest to us adult educators who spend much of our time considering the relationship between education and work.

We need to develop theories and strategies of education for the revolutionary period we are living

As adult educators, we need to seriously consider what it means to educate in an increasingly laborless world. The “learning for earning” approach that Phyllis Cunningham (1993) critiqued decades ago is losing its foundation, and now we must assess it from a new standpoint. We are increasingly facing the prospect of educating in a context of learning for no earning. What would learning without earning look like? This puts the basic question before us. What is the purpose of education? This highly philosophical question is becoming increasingly a very practical question. I am not sure we have a lot of ink in our field’s current inkwell to answer this question. I am not sure we have a clear understanding that this is the backdrop upon which tomorrow’s blueprint will be drawn. For some insights on this dilemma, I think we need to look at the nature of emerging and growing social movements.

The most dynamic social movement struggles today in the US and globally are struggles about survival. Movements today are putting forth basic slogans such as “Black Lives Matter” in a time when the rudimentary right to live is under attack. In the Dakotas, American Indians from multiple nations are engaged in land and water protection based on the simple principle that water is life. The most dynamic sector of the labor movement is low wage workers. Many of these workers have no unions; nevertheless, they are changing minimum wage policy across the country through militant struggles to demand a wage with which they can afford to buy the basics of life. The Poor People’s Marches at the 2016 National Conventions of the two political parties of the powers that be call what they do “March for our Lives.” These marches raise the right to survival in a world where old relations and the old society are breaking down, and the new is struggling to be born (Gramsci, 1971).

While socio-political economic contradictions and their accompanying polarization are reaching breaking points, we need to be asking ourselves, what will the new look like? Well, what do adult educators understand about our current realities, what’s in our inkwell? We have an awareness of polarization. We know we are in a situation of growing fragile states (Bolton & Hernandez, 2016). We know neoliberalism and marketization are restricting our field (Choi & Schied, 2016; Redmon Wright, 2016). We know we come from a tradition of social justice (e.g., Collins, Yelich Biniecki, & Polson, 2016; Glowacki-Dudka et al., 2016; Ray & Zarestky, 2016) and we have a desire to maintain our field’s commitment to social justice.

I’m not sure, however, that we understand the revolutionary nature of our epoch. Today’s struggles, as I mentioned above, are about surviving. The growing sectors of society, finding themselves increasingly marginalized from the basic relation of capitalism—you get a job, to get money, to buy what you need—represent a growing, objectively revolutionary sector of society. In other words, a growing sector of humanity—a sector that the CEO’s like that of McDonald’s no longer need nor want—finds itself in a situation in which its very ongoing survival is in direct contradiction to the prevailing socio-political economic relations. For this growing sector of humanity to survive, we need new socio-political economic relations; in other words, we need a new society, where distribution of the basics of life is based on need and not the ability to pay. This is socialism.

This situation makes for very serious and difficult struggles, but it also moves the struggle for socialism off the plane of rhetoric and on to the plane of practical demands. Socialism is no longer about trying to convince people of a utopian dream, or about whispering sweet Marxism-Leninism in someone's ear to swoon them to a great idea. It is about meeting the very practical demands of housing for the millions of homeless. It is about providing food for the millions of hungry. It is about providing healthcare for the millions without it. It is about providing these readily available basic necessities to the growing sector of humanity which has no ability to pay for that which we understand as human rights. Distribution based on need, and not on the ability to pay, is a practical solution; it is no longer a utopian political slogan.

We, as adult educators, need to put our knowledge of education to the service of movements and we need to develop theories and strategies of education for the revolutionary period we are living. This means that we the educators need to be educated, as we also advance our tradition of social justice.

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