Democratic Considerations for Fostering Lifelong Education for Women

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This paper uses a critical feminist theoretical approach to argue that systemic concerns around equity, social justice, and access need to be taken up by educators, administrators, and policy makers in order to address democratic considerations for fostering lifelong learning for women.

This paper examines the background analytical framework for a SSHRC (Social Science and Humanities Research Council) funded study on lifelong learning experiences of women in Canada. I begin by examining how democratic beliefs have been taken up in discourses in lifelong learning, and draw upon critical feminist theory to consider some of the criticisms of how these concerns have been undermined by the effects of globalized capitalism. Challenging the focus on lifelong learning and the marketplace (Gouthro, 2002), this paper will examine three democratic considerations that should be taken into account to foster lifelong learning for women; a) structural gendered inequalities that situate women at a disadvantage in accessing and participating fully in educational contexts, b) a narrow definition of lifelong learning that focuses on the marketplace which serves to exclude, overlook, and diminish women’s learning potentiality, and c) the need to consider gender as a complex variable within the broader discourse of education for inclusion. I conclude by considering implications for informing policy development and our pedagogical practices as democratic educators.

Democracy and Lifelong Learning

The pivotal UNESCO report, Learning to Be (Faure, Herrera, Kaddoura, Lopes, Petrovsky, Rahnema, & Ward, 1972), advocated that opportunities for lifelong education should be considered a basic human right. Lifelong learning was perceived to have many ameliorative effects that could serve to improve the conditions of humans across the globe.

Unfortunately, however, the focus in recent discourses in lifelong learning has tended to view education as a precious resource that is to be used to place individuals, corporations, and nation-states in a competitive position (Gouthro, 2002). Current discussions in lifelong learning emphasize the need for individuals to map their own learning trajectories (Gorard, Reeves & Fevre, 1999). Learning is framed in a competitive context, with individuals, corporations and countries vying for an advantage. When education as an individual responsibility, each person must situate him/herself in the most advantageous position within a “risk society” (Beck, 1992). This approach tend to minimize the importance of social justice considerations when fostering educational opportunities and further marginalizes women and disadvantaged groups.

The support that governments, universities, and corporations often lend to lifelong education ventures is generally linked with an acknowledgment that in a culture characterized by change, there is a need for people to continually learn new skills and
adapt to a rapidly evolving global marketplace (Methven & Hansen, 1997; Edwards, 1997). While lip service is often paid to broader notions of lifelong learning that also encompasses learning in contexts outside of the paid workplace, the main focus, rationale, and willingness to provide support for education is usually connected to a bottom-line mentality that focuses on “learning for earning.”

Using a critical feminist perspective, I argue there is a need for broader, democratic beliefs to inform educational practices and policies. Critical theorists in adult education have drawn upon the work of the German philosopher, Jurgen Habermas, to envision a communicative approach towards learning that supports democratic ideals. Michael Welton argues that “the central question for civil societarian adult educators and citizens is simply this: who can place issues on the agenda and determine what direction the lines of communication take?” (2001, p. 32). Are practices in policies in lifelong learning to be determined through the mechanistic, utilitarian directives of the marketplace, or can critical educators shape a broader, more holistic view of what should encompass a learning society? Similarly, critical feminists such as Nancy Fraser raise important questions about justice and inclusion issues, paramount to democratic educational practices. Fraser believes that concerns around redistribution (sharing resources) and recognition (politics of identity) are often pitted against one another in what she perceives to be “false antitheses,” arguing that “justice today requires both redistribution and recognition” (2003, p. 9). Both of these factors must be taken up by feminists (and supporters) to address democratic concerns and to provide more inclusive learning opportunities for women.

**Structural Inequalities for Women**

There are still many structural inequalities that limit women’s ability to participate fully in lifelong learning, supporting Fraser’s argument that “redistribution” is still a key factor to be negotiated for women to attain equitable participation in society. These inequities unfortunately seem to exist in virtually all societies, to a greater or lesser extent. Structural social inequalities include lesser access to financial and educational resources, as well as less support and fewer opportunities to attain positions of power and authority within government, industry, religious, and educational institutions. In addition, women continue to carry disproportionately greater burdens of unpaid labour in all societies. Violence that targets women, ranging from sexual harassment to rape and murder, still casts a dark shadow of patriarchy over the lives of all women (and men who genuinely care about them).

As critical theorists have noted, discourses in lifelong learning are increasingly shaped by the language of the global marketplace, that denotes learners as clients and education as a commodity (Gouthro, 2002). When the agenda for lifelong learning is shaped primarily by market forces, women are frequently disadvantaged (Jackson, 2003). Women’s commitments to other family members means that women will frequently either limit, delay, or struggle under adverse circumstances to continue their education. Policies that acknowledge and address these concerns need to be developed. Women generally have responsibilities and connections to the homeplace that lead them to have different lifelong learning trajectories than men (Gouthro, 2005). Their own needs and
ambitions are often tempered by their socially assigned responsibilities and commitments to caring for others. Women consistently maintain a disproportionate responsibility for caring labour, such as motherwork (Hart, 1997). Having children disadvantages women in the labour force and in their pursuit of educational goals far more than men, as can be seen in recent research on participation rates in adult education in the UK where “a male with a child is 1.6 times as likely to participate as a woman with a child” (Selwyn and Gorard, 2003, p. 176-177). Crittenden (2001) and Budig and England (2001) note that the “costs” of raising children are primarily borne by women, resulting in lower incomes and less opportunity for advancement. Women are more vulnerable to the caprices of an unforgiving marketplace if they take time out for caring labour (which they are socially assigned), and in the case of divorce, their income is likely to drop substantially (while a man’s is likely to increase significantly). The same inequalities that hamper workplace advancement impact on detrimentally on educational opportunities for women’s participation.

To create more democratic approaches that would foster learning opportunities for women, the structural inequalities between men and women within society continue to need to be acknowledged. While women have made great progress in obtaining further education and working in the paid labour force, an emphasis on competition and individualism factors out structural inequalities that need to be addressed for more equitable learning opportunities. Policies that are developed to enhance lifelong education opportunities do not address adequately the unique challenges that women learners frequently face. As long as these structural inequities exist, women and men are not choosing their learning pathways from an even starting point.

**Broadening our understanding of lifelong learning**

A broader emphasis on lifelong learning that occurs in a wide range of contexts may be beneficial for all learners, but it is particularly important for women. Significant learning occurs outside of the marketplace as well as in it. Learning in the homeplace, in community, and recreational and civil society organizations all serve important purposes. A critical feminist perspective reveals the need to recognize learning that occurs in the realm of the lifeworld - the everyday world of taken-for-granted activities, where our connections to others and understanding of the world is first formed. Exploring learning that occurs in this realm often provides important insights that are left out in a focus on learning that is connected with a profit-oriented marketplace.

Currently, lifelong education is often an important venue for the transition between unpaid and paid labour commitments, when women shift as employees back into the marketplace (Bird, 1999). Due to the devaluation of women’s unpaid labour, and the competitive individualized context predominant in current educational discourses, there is often a remedial approach towards women “returners.” Hayes and Smith (1994) found that women are often treated as though they are deficient in adult education contexts. Susan Parsons notes the “prevailing ideology regarding gender is deeply embedded in our society and is also engrained in existing educational structures, making its authority both more elusive and more powerful (1993, p. 30). Challenging embedded ideas of what
constitutes a “committed” or “productive” learner is problematic, when these definitions are frequently linked with a marketplace orientation. Hart (1997) argues that educators need to develop a recognition for learning in more holistic contexts, i.e. poor urban black mothers who struggle to learn, survive, and raise their children under adverse conditions.

Recently, critical educators have pointed out the need to consider lifelong learning as a means to advance civil society (Welton, 2001) and citizenship (Johnston, 1999). These are important realms and for sustaining democracy. Welton argues that “Habermas’s recent reflections on civil society and the public sphere are richly suggestive for adult learning theorists and practising adult educators who are designing intervention strategies for a just and honest learning society (2001, p. 33). Concerns around challenging what Habermas would term “system imperatives” (forces of the marketplace) that are encroaching into the realm of the lifeworld (our everyday world of home, local community, and civil society) must be taken up by educators committed to democratic practices.

Rennie Johnston (1999) explains that there are four overlapping approaches towards education and citizenship that can be examined from the social purpose tradition in adult education. First, there is adult learning for inclusive citizenship that addresses economic and social exclusion. Secondly, there is adult learning for pluralistic citizenship which recognizes concerns of identity and difference. Thirdly, there is adult learning for reflexive citizenship whereby “adult learners [can] engage more actively and critically with the idea of both citizen’s rights and their responsibilities” (1999, p. 184). Finally, there is adult learning for active citizenship that has the opportunity to bring together divergent groups of citizens to actively work together in groups towards initiating social change. “Common to all these groups, is that they are involved in learning and in different ways they promote and develop their individual and collective voice” (1999, p. 186). Our understanding of the purposes of lifelong learning shifts if we address the need to sustain learning that occurs in lifeworld realms - from the homeplace to civil society organizations.

One of the problems with understanding concerns around citizenship is the all too frequent public conflation of “citizen” with “taxpayer,” which is particularly problematic for women outside of the paid labour force. Elliott (2000) points out the needs to recognize gendered forms of discrimination that could serve to disadvantage women if the model for citizenship participation does not acknowledge inequities in circumstances. She notes that “entry into the public sphere alone does not ensure ‘equality’ for women” (Elliott, 2000, p. 15). It is important to recognize the value of unpaid labour, as well as provide support for women to access paid labour.

Nancy Fraser (2003) notes the dual concerns that frequently create tensions in resolving issues of inequality. Demands for parity (everyone has the same rights, privileges and access to resources) are often countered against the uniqueness of identity (the special considerations that particular groups wish to have recognized). From a critical feminist perspective, we can see the need for women to have equal access to learning opportunities, but at the same time there needs to be recognition for differences in experience i.e. the focus in many women’s lives on caring labour. These concerns are
not mutually exclusive. Both approaches towards equity have to be addressed in order to create democratic opportunities for full participation in lifelong learning.

**Identity and Democratic Inclusion**

A democratic approach towards learning needs to take into account the unique differences and situations of all learners. Fostering policies in lifelong education that address these concerns is important for minorities and learners with special needs. Gender is just one variable that needs to be addressed if we are to consider what inclusion means in all learning contexts, and to assess how privilege too frequently defines educational goals. Adult educators who are motivated to support democratic practices need to critically reflect upon the policies and pedagogical environments that they are involved with to consider how the particular needs and challenges of their learners are being addressed.

Women of colour, lesbians, poor women, and other women in minority positions, have multiple challenges in attaining equity and recognition. For example, in developing civil society, feminists have often had to struggle to have issues pertaining particularly to women included on the agenda for social change. In her examination of the development of civil society in Latin America’s southern cone countries (Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay), Jaqueline Pitenguy points out that feminists “had to struggle simultaneously to reestablish democracy and to widen the democratic agenda beyond classical civil and political rights to include gender inequality as a central democratic theme” (2002, p. 807).

Similarly, Bannerji, Mojab and Whitehead note that women in anti-colonial nationalist movements also occupied subject positions that were multiply determined by notions and practices of gender, class, racism, and ethnicization. As potential citizens of emerging nations, they possessed plausible claims to political, legal and social equality with men. As women in patriarchal and class-based societies, however, they were often legally defined as the property of husbands and fathers (2001, p. 21).

Minority women face multiple barriers that hinder full democratic participation, barriers that are often played out in more subtle ways in different learning contexts. Educators need to acknowledge and address these concerns if they are to be able to create what bell hooks (2003) calls a “teaching community.” hooks recognizes that educators can never promise to have a completely safe learning environment, but she does argue that creating a space where people can genuinely participate, listen, and learn from one another can provide a constructive place where important learning can occur.

**Implications for Policy, Pedagogy, and Practice**

Democracy is can either be fostered or stifled in different educational contexts. Critical and feminist educators recognize the need to continually reflect upon their own teaching practices. Brookfield states that “in our classrooms, student learn democratic or manipulative behavior. They learn whether independence of thought is really valued or whether everything depends on pleasing the teacher” (1995, p. 25). A democratic learning space is one that is characterized by open, dialogical relationships. Fraser
explains the complicated and intertwined demands of creating dialogical opportunities for learning:

Fair democratic deliberation concerning the merits of recognition claims requires parity of participation for all actual and possible deliberators. That in turn requires just distribution and reciprocal recognition. This circularity...faithfully expresses the reflexive character of justice as understood from the democratic perspective (2003, p. 44).

In order to address concerns of both redistribution and recognition, educational policies, institutional structures, and underlying values that shape educational practices have to be carefully examined. For example, although women’s participation in higher education has increased dramatically over the past few decades, women still only comprise a third of all doctoral students. They are less likely to be in higher ranking, tenured positions in universities (Gouthro, 2005). Women are still more likely to be primary caregivers for children and other family members, which disadvantages them as they move up the increasingly competitive ranks in universities. Issues of redistribution need to be taken up to address this - such as the lesser financial support and time constraints that women experience because of domestic obligations. In addition, there are issues of recognition to consider. Women’s lives do not mirror men’s, and the differences in their experiences should be valued so that they are not perceived as being “deficient.” Some policies are beginning to address these concerns, ie. SSHRC applications allow applicants to explain extenuating circumstances if there has been a break in their career trajectory. However, there is still a need for more comprehensive changes to be made to create more equitable opportunities for women to be successful in academe.

In conclusion, there are still many concerns that need to be addressed to create equitable and inclusive opportunities for women to participate in lifelong learning. The current trend to support an individualistic and market oriented approach towards learning needs to be challenged by critical and feminist educators in order to create more democratic opportunities for women to engage fully in a learning society.

References


