A Feminist Perspective - Hearing the Marginalized Voices, Utilizing Narrative, Reflection, Daily Realities, and Personal Experience.

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Abstract: Learning within non-formal educational sites based on Father Moses Coady’s overarching paradigm that “every social problem is an educational problem”. A partial response to Dr. Jack Mezirow’s policy and program recommendations regarding the social goals of adult education (AAACE October, 1991).

This paper opens the academic toolbox and examines some of the instruments (feminism, narrative, reflection) used in creating the framework for a larger research project entitled ‘Learning for Social Change’ (Whitman, 2002), that looked at non-traditional sites of learning which occur on a daily basis for everyone. The research was influenced by Father Moses Coady, a Catholic priest from Antigonish, Nova Scotia. Based on the overarching paradigm that “every social problem is an educational problem” (Coady, cited by Gillen, in Scott, Spencer, and Thomas, 1998, p. 275), the larger project examines the idea that the learning site and the learning experience are around us and within us constantly. It focuses on recognizing the normalcy of those learning experiences that occur outside of formalized institutions, while identifying the crossover between the academic and practical domains of Social Work and Education.

I argue that our aim as educators is to broaden the spectrum of what is acknowledged or defined as a learning experience/learning site. As Gustavsson and Osman (1997) state, “Life-long learning is conceptualized as integrative. This view claims that people learn, though in different ways, no matter where or when” (p.180). These authors continue to say “that the learning which takes place in everyday life ... should be integrated in the formal learning which takes place in different forms of education” (p.180). Gustavsson and Osman also explain that the implementation of this idea requires “taking into account the different experiences and histories of the various social groups in [a] society which have shaped their present realities and experiences” (p.180). They add that “learning new things is often interpreted as something one has encountered, and has been a part of, or experienced in such a tangible way that it has made imprints in, the adult student’s conception of the world” (p.180). Those ‘voices’ must be heard.

Three such examples, or scenarios, are provided in the larger project-paper written for Simon Fraser University (Whitman, 2002). In that research I offer concrete examples of connections between an individual learner’s position and the social forces within which peoples’ lives are elaborated. The context for learning was within three unique cultures: the First Nations or Aboriginal culture; the socially developed inner-city drug/sex culture; and the culture of bikers, specifically the women owner/riders of motorcycles in this male dominated social structure.

Mezirow’s Recommendations
Exploring non-traditional sites of learning, the link between the domains of Social Work and Education, and giving voice to issues, situations, or forces with the obligation of utilizing
reflection, daily realities, and personal experience -- the use of these modes of inquiry are also in response to Dr. Jack Mezirow’s policy and program recommendations regarding the social goals of adult education outlined in the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education’s (AAACE) October, 1991, issue. Mezirow refers to the aim of the organization’s seven principles, by which he “called for the solution of community problems. Social action on behalf of reasoned social change in the context of the quest for meaning was declared the fundamental raison d’etre of modern adult education” (Mezirow, 1991). Mezirow points out that the profession of adult education must be concerned with democratic values, and that “we have had nothing to say about ... racism, sexism, multipluralism, homelessness, ... poverty, welfare or unemployment–all matters of crucial concern to adult learning and education” (1991). These are topics elaborated upon within the triptych of examples presented in my larger body of research. Mezirow also states:

We have long since severed our tenuous bonds to social activists, and very few mainstream adult educators know anything about how to work with drug victims, prisoners, AIDS victims, the homeless, tenants organizations, environmental groups, block associations or how the general public should be reached to foster active participation in critical discourse about pressing public issues (1991).

As one of those “very few mainstream adult educators”, and one who has worked with every client group mentioned above, I feel duty-bound to explore such research projects. Coming from a theoretical paradigm of ‘social reconstructionism’ (Eisner, 1979), my larger research project examines how individuals have reclaimed power within the context of their social environment.

**Feminist Approach**

My praxis using the feminist perspective is based on five principles noted in Johnson (1995): “eliminating false dichotomies and artificial separations, reconceptualizing power, valuing process equally with product, the validity of renaming, and the personal is political” (p.32). Johnson continues on to describe this paradigm as a holistic view which values the renaming of action in order to eliminate discriminatory language, while recognizing that personal problems are often resultant from political injustice which requires the focus of intervention to be on change in large systems. My objective has been to look at how the intervention for change at an individual level occurs, and therefore how these individual situations affect the larger systems. Johnson refers to feminism as, “a paradigm that seems very useful in any situation in which discrimination is of major concern, for example work with women or minority groups” (p.32). My contention is that because each of the specific scenarios which I highlight pay attention to women or minority groups, the use of a feminist approach is appropriate. As Reynolds (1999) explains “anyone, male or female, who endeavors to work toward an expanded epistemology which includes women’s experience and which questions changes in the sex/gender system over time, could be considered a feminist researcher” (p.10). Reynolds (1999) cites Mary Evans (1982) who “defines a feminist theorist as someone who attempts a coherent analysis of her situation and that of other women” (p.10). Reynolds (1999) also cites Kathy Ferguson (1984) who articulates that “feminist theory is not simply about women ... it is about the world, but seen from the usually ignored and devalued vantage point of women’s experience” (p.10).

My use of a social milieu for the feminist paradigm is important according to “A definition of feminism’s institutionalization as ‘habitat’, rather than as acceded-to rules and policies, [which]
makes particular sense in the context of an analysis of American feminism. As distinct from the state-driven feminism of much of Europe, the success of American feminism is dependent, at the very least, on strong organizational efforts in civil society” (Tarrow, 1997, cited in Katzenstein, 1998, p.198, emphasis in original). This author continues on to say, “It is important to leave open to consideration the possibility that feminist activism in some of its 1990s manifestations demands as much or more in the way of societal change even as it does so less overtly” (p.198).

As Katzenstein (1998) states, “feminist activists’ arsenal of political activism has drawn only fleetingly on demonstrative protest activities and even more rarely on violent activism ... [it] is situated in the experience of freedom movements” (p.196).

This paper also seeks to emphasize the link stated in a book review by Walker (1999) of “giving voice to issues, situations, and forces” with the “imperative that feminist principles such as reflection, inclusion of daily and socio-cultural realities, and personal experience become integral parts of learning” (p.85).

Use of Narrative

Of the many pedagogical approaches available to transfer information, the use of narrative appears to cross many boundaries. A good story can capture the imagination, inspire, instruct, while providing moral lessons or offer a gentle introductory format for new information to be perused, pondered, and possibly absorbed. “Second only to the power of the metaphor, is the role of narrative in engaging the imagination in moral reasoning” (Shakotko and Walker, 1999, p.209). In reading Shakotko and Walker (1999) I appreciate the legitimacy that narrative can offer academic approaches to learning. They reference M. Johnson (1993) who speaks about our attempts to reconstruct our lived narratives for self-understanding, in order to partly explain the morality of our actions, and to imaginatively extend them into the future (Shakotko et al, 1999, p. 210). They assert that narrative “situates an agent within a context and clarifies the roles and scripts within which human action can take place” (p. 210).

In my larger body of research, my first two scenarios utilize the concept that, “We learn how to act through stories which we tell and which we share with others” (p. 210). The third scenario exercises a more limited use of narrative with the purpose of creating “a space for shared dialogue”, and it “provides a common frame within which dialogue can proceed”, where “we share a context, an arena, where productive discourse can occur” (p.211). The idea that alternative possibilities to one’s existence can be presented in a format that is non-threatening provides a pedagogical approach that places particular abstract concepts within a concrete structure, allowing thought about the concept, and an opportunity to incorporate that thinking into one’s own life (p.211). As Shakotko, et al, (1999) describe the use of narrative, it enriches and expands our perspective (p.211).

Use of Reflection

Scenarios in my larger project attempt to incorporate Mezirow’s definition of reflection which includes three dimensions: the content, the process, and the premise (Boshier, 1989; Cranton, 1996, p.81). These reflective dimensions are important for ‘learning for social change’ because they reflect upon the description or content of the problem; the strategies used to solve the problem; and the relevance of the assumptions, beliefs, and values of the problem itself.

Patricia Cranton (1996) writes about the use of reflection:
It is generally agreed in the literature (Brookfield, 1987; Boud and Walker, 1991; Tennant and Pogson, 1995) that critical reflection is the key to learning from experience. Educators learn about teaching by talking about their experiences, becoming aware of the assumptions and expectations they have, questioning these assumptions, and possibly revising their perspectives. (p.2).

As I write and speak about personal experiences, this critical reflection has allowed me to learn more from them – about perspective, practice, ideology, social policy, educational theory, and the cross links between the domains of Social Work and Education.

Reflecting upon MacIntyre’s (1984) intellectual virtues and terminology has prompted my recognition of how and why I attempt to discharge my social role, move towards the achievement of my specifically human telos, and examine the utility in achieving earthly and heavenly success (as he describes the virtues). For example, my philosophy of thirty years’ practice as a social worker includes the knowledge that the “goods external” which MacIntyre speaks of such as wealth, prestige, and power are not forthcoming in a Social Work domain. Indeed, even Social Work pedagogy defines the problem in explicit terms: “One disadvantage of being a social worker is that you will probably not get rich (see Gibelman & Schervich, 1996)” (Gambrill, 1997, p.6). More egalitarian and altruistic values, or as MacIntyre calls them, “goods internal” (1984, p.188), such as making a difference in someone’s life, feeling rewarded through helping others, and having the opportunity to continue to learn throughout my career spur me on. The development of “Ways of knowing other than the narrowly scientific have been referred to as practice wisdom” (Johnson, 1995, p.46, italics are hers). Personal reflections upon my own learning, in order to put perspective upon this ‘practice wisdom’ have resulted in this review of practice/ensuing research.

Non-Traditional Sites of Learning

In following the ‘road less traveled’ into the margins of community education, the metaphor should be extended to represent these non-traditional learning sites as a byway or path not yet as fully accredited by the world of organized institutional education. Cranton (1996) explains that informal groups “may have leaders, organizers ... these individuals function as adult educators” (p. 15). There is a need, I believe, to develop research on this population, since, as Cranton continues to explain, “This group is further removed from the world of formal educator preparation and development than any group discussed so far” (p.15). Many facilitators and organizers in informal venues who do not consider themselves to be educators or teachers, really are. They lead by example, support, mentoring, and instruction.

Cranton (1996), refers to the Antigonish Movement of community programs for fishermen, farmers, and industrial workers in Nova Scotia during the 1940’s and the American Highlander Folk School run by Myles Horton in Tennessee during the 1930’s. Although considered “informal learning groups” by Cranton (p.15), I would argue that these examples are models of ‘structured centres of learning’ within the concept of community education. My own research population, I believe, is more micro-oriented, more informal, than these organized associations of acknowledged learning communities. An example of this more individualized focus would be to compare my first scenario with that of Roberta Sykes’ (2000) research into community education. In spite of the fact that the context of my first scenario is based upon an Aboriginal reserve similar to Roberta Sykes research context, my focus is not on established educational programs under the aegis of the authority figures within that community, as she has concentrated.
Rather than looking at acknowledged on-reserve educational programs, I have addressed individual stories, and investigation about where the learning occurs, who is the learner, and how information is exchanged, to create more involved, emancipated citizens. However, I am willing to use the approaches espoused by adult education founders to further my own thesis – concepts such as communicative competence and compassion (Habermas, cited in Collins, 1998); transformational learning (Cranton, 1996); critical reflection (Mezirow, 1991); empowerment (Horton and Freire, 1990); and collective, collaborative, and social learning as the basis for adult education (Finger, 1995, cited by Kerka, 1996).

I appreciate the following vision of informal learning:

Krishnamurti (1964, p.14) writes, “Do you know what it means to learn? When you are really learning you are learning throughout your life and there is no one special teacher to learn from. Then everything teaches you—a dead leaf, a bird in flight, a smell, a tear, the rich and the poor” (cited in Cranton, 1996, p.15).

Connections Between Social Work and Educational Domains

Reflection upon the overlap of education and social work has awakened new possibilities. The analysis of social problems requiring educational solutions has highlighted the idea that diverse approaches to ‘social work’ are available by looking into other domains. Not only does education fall into the realm of teaching new social workers how to enter the field, or helping individuals to work through change and transformational learning, but educational theory also provides overlapping approaches to social work concerns. For example, Habermas (Collins, 1998), speaks of communicative competence, an idea that is also at the heart of relationship building for social workers. Habermas also speaks of compassion, and worldview, both themes basic to social work praxis. Mezirow’s (Boshier, 1989, video) and Cranton’s (1996) views on the topic of transformational learning in the field of education, (built from a foundation of psychological theory), are equally as important and transferrable to social work requirements that are imperative to supporting and encouraging change projects for individuals, groups, and organizations. Fullan’s (1993, 1999) educational theories on change agentry can also be transposed into what social workers refer to as ‘change probe status’. Thus, links are established to connect these two domains. This leads to exponentially more solutions, or at least approaches to find more solutions in both fields.

Definition of Social Change

The reference to ‘social change’ within this project includes a number of aspects. Primarily I am considering individual or perspective transformation within a social milieu. In addition, I expand that view to include the examination of groups or cultures within their social contexts.

When the terms education and social change are mentioned three notions come to mind, according to a video dialogue between Roger Boshier, from British Columbia, and Michael Law of New Zealand (1989). These notions include the context being framed by: (1) economic development – capitalism and banking; (2) industrialization – international competitiveness; and (3) democracy, control, a say in affairs – people and their world. In other words, this third notion refers to “a democratic social world to the extent in which people exercise a say in how their lives take place and are governed” (1989).

It is this third aspect of social change which I am interested in, as it relates to the learning which takes place in individuals’ lives that makes a difference to the person, their family, and
their community. The critical difference in ideology, as explained by Law to Boshier, between the first two focuses of social change (economic development and industrialization) and the third (democracy), is that difference being made with a company’s goals in mind, versus the difference we can make for individuals (1989). The first two notions focus on reproducing the existing power relations (if not strengthening them), while the third approach regarding democracy, questions the power relations and attempts to equalize them. Michael Law’s definition of democracy, “that is a whole way of life - political, social, and economic” (Boshier, 1989), is an important definition for my project. This inclusive definition of democracy pulls together the diverse aspects of learning, as I explore ethnic and social cultures; socioeconomic factors; social policy relating to First Nations peoples living on reserves; social policy relating to lack of services for drug rehabilitation; power positions affected by gender; and the political will, or lack thereof to alter social inequality.

Boshier (1989), asks the question, “Is the nub of the issue of education for social change, then, that which concerns the extent to which the ‘elites’ conduct education designed to fit people into their structure, as compared to a different kind of structure where people are actually attempting to upset existing power relationships?” My intent has been to examine informal sites of learning, those micro places – the unofficial and likely overlooked places of change, where people are becoming educated, and consciously or not, in that process, are upsetting existing power relationships. That is, there is learning for social change occurring outside of formalized educational institutions. “Real liberation is achieved through popular participation. Participation in turn is realized through an educational practice that itself is both liberatory and participatory, that simultaneously creates a new society and involves the people themselves in the creation of their own knowledge” (Freire and Horton, 1990, p.xxx). “The philosophy of education for empowerment remains” (p.xxix). Law states that the purpose of education has changed since the 1960’s. “It has become an elegant technical institute training kids for jobs, not educating kids to be citizens” (1989). My larger project examines specific situations where individuals or groups are learning/changing, not for jobs, per se, but for more control over their personal social setting. Watkins and Marsick (1993) emphasized that “learning can be ‘intentionally planned, serendipitously discovered, incidentally absorbed, or retrospectively revealed’ (p.47)” (cited in Cranton 1996,p.11). My project attempted to review retrospectively a practice of engaging learners in social change who did learn intentionally, serendipitously, or even incidentally while focusing on a variety of basic survival or recreational life enhancing experiences.

Rather than thinking of large global social movements when the term social change is used, my perspective is that social environments of the marginalized groups being written about, both shape and are shaped by the individual transformation of the adult learners in those situations. My larger project examines the embeddedness of personal learning experiences in the contexts in which they take place. These personal learning experiences in turn create social change, and I continue to argue that it is unfortunate that formal education does not take more notice of the significance of these informal sites of learning. Given the global educational standard encouraging the concept of life-long learning (SIDA, 2002; UNESCO, 1972), it might well benefit educators to examine where and who those people are that fall outside of the established institutions, and how they continue to learn in a social context that impacts changes at an individual, community, and national level. Academics must step down from the institutional ivory tower, get our hands dirty in the trenches, experience reality from the perspective of service recipients, or minimally, lower the draw bridges between faculties and departments to share theories, positions, and possible solutions.
References


Mezirow, Jack. (November 15, 1991). *Faded visions and fresh commitments: adult education’s social goals, a policy paper prepared for the American association for adult and continuing education (AAACE)*.


