Academic Adult Education and the Vocation of Intellectual Work: 
Conditions and Quandaries

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Abstract: The vocation of intellectual work involves a commitment to principles and practices of critical thought and self-reflection which are frequently espoused in the academic adult education literature. However, the increasing corporatization and technicization of academic life creates conditions where the pursuit of this vocation is pushed to the margins in the rush to serve the perceived needs and dictates of the global economy.

In his book *Representations of the intellectual*, Edward Said (1994) uses the term "vocation" to characterize the meaning and value of intellectual work. The essence of the intellectual vocation, Said claims, is to ask hard questions about the nature of truth, whose truth, and how to speak the truth in the face of power. He questions, however, the extent to which this vocation can be fulfilled in institutions such as universities which are increasingly shaped by the idiom and interests of the marketplace, and which offer numerous inducements for shirking the rigours of truth-speaking in favour of the rewards of "accommodation, yea-saying, settling in" (p. 63).

The purpose of this paper is to use Said's view of the vocation of intellectual work as a backdrop for examining current conditions and quandaries within adult education, in the context of contemporary academic life. As university professors, students, and practitioners of adult education, how do we -- or ought we -- see our intellectual work as a vocation, in the sense that Said describes? How does academia help to support this vocational vision? How does it, conversely, impose impediments and temptations that might hinder or cloud that vision?

Adult Education and the Vocation of Intellectual Work

The first question to consider is the extent to which adult education fits within the framework of intellectual work that Said puts forward. On the one hand, the idea of intellectual work has elitist connotations that, on the surface, do not sit well with adult education's more populist and pragmatic history (Selman, Selman, Cooke & Dampier, 1998). On the other hand, however, there is much within the adult education literature on critical theory, transformative learning, and social change that resonates with Said's view that the purpose of intellectual work is to question and challenge taken-for-granted assumptions about reality embedded within the dominant worldview (Briton, 1996; Welton, 1995; Usher, Bryant & Johnston, 1997).

There are also parallels between Said's perspective on the vocation of intellectual work and Michael Collins' (1991) discussion of adult education as a vocation. Collins describes vocation as a thoughtful commitment to ethical practice, involving both a social vision of practice as a contribution to the good of all, and an ongoing critical, self-reflective engagement with questions about which (and whose) good is embedded within the accepted conventions and truths of the day. For Collins, as for Said, the meaning of vocation is intended to convey a commitment
to social justice, and to ongoing critical scrutiny, moral questioning, and dissent against the reified injustices entrenched within the status quo. From this view, intellectual work is a central feature of adult education as a critical practice. The vocation of intellectual work, in adult education and elsewhere, is not about perpetuating intellectual elitism but fostering vigilant self-examination and social criticism as essential features of a dynamic, informed and democratic public life.

**The Academic Context**

The second question addressed in this paper concerns the relevance of the intellectual vocation to the academic context of adult education, and, indeed, to the broader context of academic life more generally. A natural assumption about academia is that one of its primary roles in society is the creation of knowledge through the cultivation of critical reason -- the assumption being, in other words, that the intellectual and academic vocation are one. However, as noted above, Said, among others (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993; Readings, 1996) argues that public institutions such as universities are, increasingly, so much under the sway of economic and corporate interests that they have become a habitat more for "hired agents of the information industry" (Said, 1994, p. 20) than for independent moral and critical thinkers. Within adult education, Collins (1991) is similarly critical of the "fixation on technique and efficiency" (p. 2) that dominates the scene in adult and higher education contexts alike, and which serves to perpetuate and shore up dominant stereotypes and interests rather than to rigorously examine and challenge them. From this perspective, many features of the academic context of adult education run the risk of impeding rather than fostering its vocational possibilities.

For Said, the principal bureaucratic threat to the intellectual vocation lies in the lure of advancement, entrenchment, and specialization, and the preoccupations that go along with having "offices to protect [and] territory to consolidate and guard" (p. xviii). For Collins, it is the one-dimensional conception of knowledge and practice that goes along with an obsession with technical expertise at the expense of broader philosophical and moral considerations. Such challenges to vocational work are not just abstract concerns but are often manifested within the everyday work environment of academic life. In a recent issue of the *CAUT Bulletin*, Heather Menzies and Janice Newson (2001) state that the "core values of academics' vocation are under siege" (A3) because of the growing proliferation of distance technology which is creating conditions where many people are over-extended and run of their feet. What are the effects,"they wonder, "not just on our mental and physical health but on our ability to think for ourselves, to know our own minds, and to act based on what we think is important?" (Menzies and Newson, 2001, A3). Likewise, in a recent discussion of Einstein's contributions to science, John Polanyi (2000) states that Einstein would likely not thrive in the modern Canadian academy because his work does not fit within the bureaucratic parameters of federal research funding. Although the vocation of intellectual work is to critically scrutinize such trends and bandwagons, the demands of academic life lean instead towards urging us to jump aboard and go along for the ride.

**Considerations**

The purpose of this paper is not to argue for the wholesale dismantling of universities or to assert that we, as adult educators in academia, would be better off dumping our jobs and studies, and taking to the ramparts or taking up gardening. Rather, my main aim is to engage in
the kind of intellectual work our jobs and studies beckon us to, by opening a space for reflection on the everyday conditions of academic life, in order to critically examine those conditions, and perhaps begin to identify the possibilities for living and working otherwise.

References available at [www.stfx.ca/people/adulted/](http://www.stfx.ca/people/adulted/)