

Adult Literacy and Social Justice: Teaching with Criticality and Intentionality

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We are at a moment in history of slowly emerging from a global pandemic that highlighted for the world what many of us have known; that Black and Brown lives are considered dispensable and expendable by the dominant culture. We saw the continued killing of Black men and women at the hands of police that sparked worldwide protests in defense of Black and Brown lives. More recently though, we have witnessed backlash against critical race theory which recognizes the profound systemic racism upon which the United States was built (namely, the understanding that this country was built by labor of enslaved Black bodies). Adult education/adult literacy programs have had a long history of contributing towards social and racial justice (like Highlander Folks School in the 1950s who taught Black Americans to read and write in order to pass the citizenship test in order to vote). In short, adult literacy programs can continue, in that tradition, to support students in becoming actors in scripts which they themselves author. This feels like an especially urgent task given the eroding of basic human rights to which marginalized populations (like poor people of color) are especially vulnerable.

As a former adult literacy practitioner for over 15 years in New York City (I now teach in higher education), I have been reflecting on what teaching in an adult literacy context during this national and global moment might look like.

How can we utilize adult literacy as a space to nurture social and racial justice? For countless adult literacy students, school represented a site of pain and disappointment; a space fraught with struggle/disappointment and to return to such a space signifies courage along with a deep desire and quest to gain visibility, voice, autonomy and respect. I remember a student sharing with me how his instructor in seventh grade told him not to bother speaking until he had something that was worth listening to. Over and over, I heard stories from students of not feeling good enough. Students shared repeatedly that staying in school was just too hard, so they left. How can adult literacy programs attend to the ways students have been traumatized by the very system that was supposed to be a path to social and economic mobility? Students' return might be as Brazilian political adult educator Paulo Freire (1970) termed, a desire to read both the world and the word. This effort should not be minimized or trivialized in any way. For many, many adult literacy students, these programs represent a last glimmer of hope in education, in redefining what is possible for them and what is possible for us as a society. How and by whom will we be judged? With so much emphasis on satisfying funding mandates in order to preserve public funding, how can adult literacy programs hold space to teach about difficult subjects...to maintain a critical focus

that would enable and make space for important truth-telling? Truth-telling must always center voices and perspectives of historically and currently marginalized groups. In our society, poor, racialized people are marginalized in myriad ways and the only real power they might have to effect change is collectively through numbers (T. Heaney, personal communication, June 10, 2020).

One way of facilitating truth-telling in adult literacy education (and indeed in all types of education) is through problem posing, a central tenet in popular education. Popular education as defined by Freire (1970) utilizes students' lived experiences and understandings of their situations. Through collective critical questioning, this approach seeks to deepen those understandings aimed at collective social change. Problem-posing education affirms men and women as beings in the process of becoming. It allows students to name their realities and their education is centered around those themes. For example, gentrification and the housing crisis might be a possible theme interrogating how it impacts different communities and who benefits from the reshaping of neighborhoods. Another theme might be COVID-19 and ways it impacted communities of students (again probing reasons for these disparities and the privilege embedded in certain taking for granted terms like social distancing and for whom this was possible). One goal of popular education is individual and collective conscious raising through education. We know that education isn't neutral or objective and as Freire (1970) reminds us, it can either function to facilitate integration into the present system in the interests of conformity or it can become the practice of freedom, in which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality in order to participate in the transformation of their worlds. One of the central tenets of popular education is that ordinary people are valuable and

collectively have the power to not only change their communities but reshape inequities in society.

My current role is as a faculty member at SUNY Empire State University with my background and research being grounded primarily in social justice and supporting marginalized populations in their ability to collectively co-construct agency and, in the process, reconceptualize who they are in the world – ultimately, affirming not only who we are as humans individually and collectively but also who we might become.

My dissertation was an oral history study of an adult literacy program in Brooklyn, New York, called The Open Book, where I taught. The program was inspired by the work of Freire. The program focused on how to engage students in sharing power and democratic decision-making in the classroom and the program at large. From its very inception, the philosophy of the program strove to model alternative visions of society rooted in more equity...something students could co-create together. Space was created by both instructors and students to unpack their lives, struggles, and hopes. Almost from the very beginning, the idea that the school was a community and students were more than just classmates to each other began to emerge. Students stayed after school, working with each other on their writing, which helped to establish a culture of peer teaching and that the space wasn't one they needed to leave once classes ended. Simultaneous co-teaching and co-learning (a central tenet in popular education) occurred organically amongst students and instructors. Cunningham (2000) reminds us that the concept of co-learners flattens the hierarchical structure. This doesn't mean the instructor doesn't have very different information than the learner; what it does assume is that the position of knowledge producer and knowledge consumer can

be regularly transposed between them through participation in praxis.

At The Open Book, no important decision was made without significant student input. For example, students were involved in hiring instructors. Many years ago, when I interviewed for a position at that program, there were two instructors and 10 students during my interview. Though I hadn't realized it at the time, students had studied each candidate's resume and decided who they wanted to interview. The students asked most of the questions during that interview. I mention that as a tiny example of what is possible in adult literacy programs today.

This critical examination of power was also embedded in curricula. In the classroom, there were efforts to build the curriculum around ideas and concerns that students were raising in class. By connecting the world inside the classroom to the larger society, opportunities for learning and making meaning expanded. Students could use the classroom to discover and discuss perspectives they had about their worlds, communities, jobs, homes, and how power was shared (or not) in each of them. bell hooks (1994) says if people don't tell their own stories, others do it for them. She reminded us that if people can speak about you better than you can talk about yourself, they will do so while erasing you and maintaining authority, authorship, and colonizer status.

Students as assistant teachers was another way the program attempted to share power. This opens up possibilities for relationships based on mutuality. Recognizing students' knowledge as an essential component in discussions inevitably impacts and shapes what the program looks like and will affect the directions it will grow. Students as assistant teachers open up possibilities for organic peer learning to occur. I should note that

the idea of assistant teachers is not unique. The Open Book certainly didn't invent this concept but did implement it in deep and committed ways that made space for other sets of voices to be included in the ongoing conversation about the program. In doing so, it institutionalized the notion that students have important things to teach each other and everyone else.

Student leadership (retreats, town hall meetings, and committees) were also essential in terms of democratic decision making in the program. There were monthly town hall meetings which focused on how things were going for people and what they would like to see happen in the program. Students were encouraged to assume leadership roles and practice skills required for those roles. Freire (1970) reminds us that to exist humanly is to name the world and in doing so, change it. Democracy is always exercised in the midst of struggle and conflict; it exists in the face of contradictions both externally and internally. Externally, it is confronted by layers of undemocratic practice. Internally, by our unwillingness to take responsibility for situations or to understand the basis on which decisions are to be made (T. Heaney, personal communication, July 20, 2020). I write here about the Open Book because I have never witnessed anything similar before or since.

With few exceptions, whenever I meet adult literacy practitioners, a constant refrain is how much effort and time is given to teaching "to the test." The test in this context is the high school equivalency exam (or GED in New York). Students spend countless class hours taking practice tests instead of learning about subject matter using a thematic focus. Most adult literacy programs are funded through a combination of federal, state, and local funding and in this landscape, satisfying funders' mandates (which includes demonstrating

test gains and satisfactory attendance) is critical. Nowhere on this checklist is attending to students' profoundly precarious, complicated lives. Instead, the sterilized, fictional reality of funders' vision for adult literacy prevails. In this era of testing with a scarcity of funds, programs end up singing for their supper and always going to bed hungry. Students, for whom this model doesn't work, drop out of programs...dreams yet again deferred.

Since my time at the program, I have continued to situate my work within a community of scholars committed to social justice. For me, education is grounded in social justice, and, at its heart, involves the question, for whom and in whose interests? Whose voices, interests, and agendas, get privileged, and whose are absent? What is preventing or supporting socially just action? Making those visible for and with students is one aspect of teaching for social justice. So, courses I currently teach are informed by popular education, and grounded in examining power, how it works, and how it can be reframed as a more collective concept. Having witnessed and experienced how power can be shared through my time at the Open Book, has informed me about pedagogy and working with adult literacy students.

Anyon (1980) writes about how students in economically privileged neighborhoods receive a different kind of public school education than those in less well-resourced neighborhoods. This "hidden curriculum" as she calls it prepares the more privileged students to be future leaders while economically disadvantaged students (many of them, future adult literacy students) end up in the least resourced schools with the least experienced teachers. The more privileged models of education focus on process and supporting students in thinking through concepts (while having agency and choice) whereas the other is focused on the right answer while chastising students. Embedded

in this hidden curriculum is teaching that certain groups will become authors and producers of knowledge while other groups will be consumers of others' concepts but never knowledge producers themselves. Understanding this, we can better see how traumatizing schooling has been for so many adult literacy students.

We can more fully understand how adult literacy can offer an opportunity for people to reconceptualize who they are as learners, as parents, as community leaders, and as humans in the world. Like Highlander Folk School and other popular education examples that situate adult literacy as a human rights struggle, we can witness that the structural inequities adult literacy students are struggling against and the ways in which these issues are systemic as well as raced and classed.

In courses I currently teach, I center social justice in all content areas. I strive to problematize notions of truth; whose truth is being proposed as the official story? To what extent can multiple opposing perspectives be privileged while preserving truth? We read different historical accounts of social justice struggles and discuss how they can all contain various aspects that are true to different groups at different points in time; in essence, we interrogate the fluidity of truth as a concept. We also focus our analysis on systems, not individuals.

Students interrogate various concepts such as solidarity and charity and what it means to stand with marginalized communities instead of speaking for them. We've also had ongoing discussions about allyship and what that could look like when acting with integrity. This embodies simultaneous co-teaching and co-learning in action. Students discuss activism they're involved in within their own communities

and how one can think beyond protest organizing to develop critiques of the dominant society in which we live while building solidarity with alternative institutions and communities that support the work of reimagining ourselves and thinking beyond fixed (often capitalistic) categories. We interrogate ways in which this society is organized that contributes to so much inequity and suffering among certain groups. Students share articles from journals like *Dialogues in Social Justice* as a way of further engaging with the issues. In one of the courses I teach, students volunteer twenty hours at an adult literacy program. Some programs students have worked in are Make the Road NY, an activist organization

that's been at the forefront of struggles for workplace justice, immigrant rights, etc. in New York City. They have also volunteered at the Youth Justice Network which is an alternative to incarceration program also in NYC, Fifth Avenue Committee, CUNY adult literacy programs, etc.

bell hooks (1994) reminds us that the classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility, we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom.

References

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