

(DIS)EMPOWERING PEDAGOGIES: REPRESSIVE TOLERANCE AND DEMOCRACY IN THE ADULT EDUCATION CLASSROOM

Conni Huber and Gary Cale

Abstract

This paper argues that many of our cherished liberal and humanistic teaching practices may lead to the marginalization and even silencing of more progressive and inclusive oppositional voices and viewpoints.

Introduction

As adult educators, we have been most influenced by progressive and critical educators who are interested in democratic social change. Such progressive and critical adult educators generally advocate for individual and social empowerment (Freire, 1970; Heaney, 1990, to name just two), democratic teaching practices (Brookfield, 1999), and inclusive and safe environments (Tisdell, 1995). Many adult educators in this camp believe in starting where the adults are (Horton, 1998), giving all adult learners voice (Sheared, 1994), and avoiding coercive environments (Ehlstain, 1976). Yet, each of these authors seem to assume, more or less, a homogenous group of oppressed people and/or potential allies, a situation we do not usually encounter in higher education. We, as often as not, teach the oppressor not the oppressed.

As such, we have often found cracks in our own practice and recently have begun to question the value of many accepted teaching strategies. Literature criticizing democratic teaching practices is sparse. However, one criticism of democratic teaching is that it allows for the voicing and acceptance of intolerant perspectives (Brookfield, 2001), creating an environment that Marcuse (1965) calls "repressive tolerance." As Nieto (1995) observes, in classrooms where multiple perspectives are expressed but are not engaged critically, students tend to view all perspectives as "true," moral, and right, no matter how opposed they may be to the goal of respect and the value of human rights. Despite such warnings, many adult educators, following traditional adult education principles noted above, are hesitant to criticize such voices and perspectives. In such "democratic" classrooms, intolerant voices often reign and oppositional voices are marginalized (Cale and Huber, 2001).

We would argue, therefore, that a tension exists between the practice of teaching for democratic social change and the outcome of such practice. Building on Newman's (1994, 2000) work on defining the enemy and ethical and confrontational action, Baptiste's (1998, 2000) concept of a pedagogy of disempowerment and coercive restraint, and Marcuse's (1965) concept of repressive tolerance, as well as feminist and critical multicultural authors, we believe that in order to teach effectively for democratic social change a different set of practices may be required.

However, we also recognize that the oppressed and the oppressor are often contained in the same person due to the different social group that each person inhabits. To paraphrase Audre Lorde, the master and the servant reside in each of us; we may in fact act as an oppressor in one situation yet be oppressed in another. Recognition of this fact problematizes pedagogies of empowerment as well as pedagogies of disempowerment.

Practitioners of (Dis)empowering Pedagogies

Before we begin a discussion of how our own teaching for social change demonstrates the ineffectiveness of traditional adult education practices, we will briefly review a few of the key ideas that Newman, Baptiste and Marcuse offer us. First, Newman (1994) reminds us that real enemies do exist; behind the corporations, the political assemblies, and the courts, are people who willingly and knowingly harm others. Our educational practice, Newman argues, does not

prepare us for the enemies in and out of our classroom; instead, we focus on our own enlightenment and that of the victims. Finally, he argues that after we have defined the enemies we must find real ways to oppose them—in and out of the classroom—using whatever means necessary, including violence.

Baptiste (1998, 2000), building primarily on Newman, advances the concept of ethical disempowerment or coercive restraint of those who would do harm. Arguing that learning organization theory, transformational learning theory and even conscientization are part of the liberal, humanist hegemony which avoids coercion in the name of democracy, he concludes that none of these theories or pedagogies provide adequate pedagogical tools to combat the oppressors or enemy. Replacing such theories and practices would be theories and practices that “stop, disempower, [and] silence the perpetrators” (Baptiste, 1998, p. 4) of vice via what he calls “ethical coercive restraint.”

Marcuse’s (1965) essay “Repressive Tolerance” offers the most succinct reason for a pedagogy of coercive restraint and oppositional teaching, a pedagogy designed to delegitimize the status quo and silence the dominant majority. In it he argues that democratic tolerance demands that all voices are heard, “that the stupid opinion is treated with the same respect as the intelligent one, the misinformed may talk as long as the informed, and propaganda rides along with education, truth with falsehood” (94). Moreover, he writes that because people are indoctrinated into the dominant hegemonic thinking, they naturally reject radical or alternative perspectives that violate their formative ideological conditioning. In an adult education classroom practicing the democratic value of honoring each learner’s voice, according to Marcuse, oppositional voices would be marginalized, met with hostility, and finally ignored. As Marcuse notes, “the conditions or tolerance are ‘loaded’: they are determined and defined by the institutional inequality” (84).

Because of these conditions which lead to a false consciousness, he argues that “suppression of regressive [policies, opinions, movements] is a prerequisite for the strengthening of progressive ones” (106). But, how does one do so with adult learners in a classroom? Adults, Marcuse argues, must be given information that challenges mainstream ideology, “information slanted in the opposite direction” (99). He notes that, “to treat the great crusades against humanity. . . with the same impartiality as the desperate struggles for humanity means neutralizing their opposite historical function, reconciling the executioners with their victims, distorting the record” (113).

Marcuse argues that negative critical thinking that builds a language of liberation must make a clear distinction between the adult learner and the adult educator. Freirean pedagogy in particular and liberal, humanist pedagogy in general attempts to downplay the distinction between learner and educator. Yet, several feminist writers have discussed the importance of claiming and exercising their authority as the teachers in their courses. In one example, Gardner (Gardner, Dean & McKaig, 1989) explains that when she tried to make her classroom “truly feminist” and took on a passive role, the feminist majority dominated the class and silenced those in the class who had less background in feminism. Only when Gardner reclaimed some of her authority were students able to critique the power dynamics that were present in the classroom. Similarly, Lewis (1990) notes, “The use of institutional power, I believe, should not always be viewed as counter-productive to our politics. I have no problem justifying the use of my institutional power to create the possibility for privilege to face itself . . . Using power to subjugate is quite different than using power to liberate” (p. 480). bell hooks (1989; 1994) also addresses this issue when she writes that the teacher’s role is to facilitate the challenge of structured power relations. This may mean that classrooms are not “safe” and that students feel uncomfortable being challenged.

Marcuse’s concept of repressive tolerance also relates to the perspective of critical multicultural educator James Banks. Marcuse (1965) writes that “tolerance is extended to policies, conditions, and modes of behavior which should not be tolerated because they are impeding, if not destroying, the chances of creating an existence without fear and misery. Banks (1995) argues that tolerance of this sort is actually repressive. In a review of multicultural educational practices, Banks (1993, 1995) identifies several levels of multicultural education, most of which maintains

the sovereignty of the dominant culture. Banks charges that these forms of multicultural education are worse than nothing due to their deleterious effects.

Taken as a whole, these writers present a strong case for examining some of adult educators' cherished liberal, humanist, and democratic practices. In the section below we will briefly discuss some of our assignments and the problems we have faced as we attempted to teach for social justice and democratic social change using a liberal, humanist oriented pedagogy.

Findings from Practice: Dr. Huber

To Marcuse (1965), autonomous thought was a necessary condition for the development of any kind of social movement intended to resist domination. He felt that "the only way people can come to a truly critical perspective is by distancing themselves in some manner from the stupefying influence of common sense ways of thinking, feeling, and speaking." Isolation and separation are potentially revolutionary, the precursors to a commitment to social change. In his analysis of liberating subjectivity Marcuse stressed three things—memory, distance and privacy. All three of these components can be present in courses taught using distance learning delivery modes.

In a distance learning course that I taught designed to help white teachers understand and move toward implementation of a more culturally relevant pedagogy, the assignments students completed alone were the most thoughtful and critical of their own positions of power. For example, students were asked to write a self-study in order to understand how their own culture and background was manifested in their teaching and the way that they thought about education. In this assignment, teachers wrote about their own backgrounds and discussed openly the racism and sexism that they experienced in their families, their lack of contact with people of color. As a result a few students owned their own passive racism.

In the next assignment, students were asked to interview a member of the marginalized group they were working with in order to understand their perspective. This assignment proved to be one of the most powerful assignments in the whole Master's degree program for some students. Most achieved a deeper understanding of the other perspective and how the interviewee viewed education. Each student asked questions about how to work more effectively with students of color and received advice that gave them new insights. In follow up surveys after the course, students most often noted this assignment as one that really affected their future teaching habits. However, in at least one instance where students formed an informal study group, the autonomous learning and thinking that seemed to begin during their self study assignment, was all but invisible after the two assignments they completed together. Students who had openly addressed the inherent racism in their classrooms and expressed a desire to learn to stop the unwitting racist practices that were a part of their hidden and overt curriculum, did not complete a significant plan for change within their classrooms. In this particular case, whenever this study group discussed any significant change in their assessment practices, they reverted to the third person and discussions that involved significant change became very broad and impersonal.

Findings from Practice: Dr. Cale

In my teaching for social justice and democratic social change at a community college in Michigan, I have attempted to help bring all my students to voice, to create a respectful and democratically based classroom by co-designing the curriculum and sharing decision-making power with the adult learners, to honor and respect individual's worldviews, even as I asked the adult learners in my classes to challenge their assumptions about the world. On the whole, I believe that my past practice has in many cases actually helped to silence some of my students, to reinforce the dominance of the status quo, and to diminish my ability to combat racism, sexism, and classism. In a semester long study of my own classroom pedagogy where I utilized democratic teaching practices as listed earlier in this paper, I have reported a number of unexpected and disturbing findings (Cale, 2001). These findings, I believe, have much to do with my attempt to create a "tolerant" classroom environment. For instance, adult learners who believed or had come to believe that oppression operates on multiple levels (including the

institutional and symbolic or cultural levels) tended to be silent in class and did not publicly challenge the more vocal students who held the opposing point of view. Essentially they refused to speak out publicly. "I didn't want to upset the other students," one student confessed.

Although in class discussions, lectures, and readings, I emphasized the institutional and symbolic/cultural levels of oppression and privilege, many adult learners remained committed to the position that racism in particular, but also sexism and classism, is an individual phenomenon. Perhaps more significantly, White adult learners (they outnumbered the people of color 12 to 4) argued that people of color could be racists, regardless of power differences, angrily citing in discussions numerous examples of how people of color had mistreated them personally. They also refused to treat the topic of racism seriously, telling me to "get over it," and eventually refused to discuss it at all. This led one student of color to stop-out, returning only when we finished our unit on racism. Her voice, which I had spent the semester nurturing, was marginalized and finally silenced in my "tolerant" classroom.

During the four weeks we spent discussing classism, we spent several class periods critically examining the concept of meritocracy as well as a quick review of capitalism and its relationship to poverty. Almost every student came into class with the belief that poverty existed due to individual deficits. Our discussion of the readings were often tense interchanges in which students stated they would accept only accept their own experiences of the poor (generally depicted as lazy or criminal) as credible evidence. In a show of collective power in one such session, students shouted me down, overwhelming me with their anger and status quo thinking.

The adult learners' gaze centered almost exclusively on the oppressed and almost never on themselves. When discussing classism, the students continually diverted the discussions away from the upper class and towards the poor. In discussions of racism, Whites consistently shifted the focus from White privilege and White people to either reverse discrimination issues or towards Black problems. Finally, in our discussions of sexism, patriarchy as an oppressive system was never adequately discussed as students constantly shifted our attention to trivial issues. The majority of the adult learners in this class spent most of their time blaming or scapegoating the victims. Dominant ideology prevailed.

Implications for Practice and Conclusions

We have begun to identify some practices that break the hegemony that Marcuse, Baptiste, Welton, and others identify as being present in the democratic classroom. Below are some suggestions to combat repressive tolerance.

Do not debate the existence of oppression in our society: teach oppression and privilege as facts. Barlas, et al. (2000) identified a study of the learning experiences of European-Americans who voluntarily participated in a cultural consciousness project using cooperative inquiry. In this example, the topic of the inquiry was "the meaning and impact of white supremacist consciousness in my life." There was no room for denial of the existence of a racist society since the very question addressed assumed that it existed. Based on this assumption, participants could examine how white supremacist consciousness had affected them personally. We feel this study indicates that stating one's assumptions up front and making it clear that those assumptions will frame the learning can help. Newman (1994) advocates such an approach.

Design different curricula for different groups: make the privileged study themselves. Banks (1988) states that curricula for dominant groups should differ from curricula designed for marginalized groups. He is pessimistic that true structural change can occur through dominant groups sharing power and instead advocates education that will help marginalized groups demand power. Christine Sleeter (1996) is more optimistic and describes learning activities that she structures for her white pre-service teacher education students that force them to develop alternative perspectives. For example, she makes the marginalized central by asking her mostly white students to develop a "why" question that they do not understand. For example, a student

may ask, "Why do African American males achieve poorly in middle school?" Then, students are asked to answer the question from the perspective of the marginalized group. To do this, students interview group members, draw on their required field experiences in marginalized communities and read authors that are members of the marginalized group. Similarly, McIntyre (1997) asked her white education students to examine critically the impact of whiteness in their lives and in the lives of their students of color without allowing them to fall back on dominant ideology.

Teach oppositionally without apology: teaching oppositionally is not indoctrination. In our opinion, we should be trying to undo the ideological indoctrination and hegemony of the dominant group. A teacher cannot do that without advancing a political agenda. Sleeter (1996) states that she is directive about the assignments and field experiences at the beginning of this two-semester sequence. Sleeter does not imagine that a two-course sequence is going to provide a total perspective transformation in her students. She explains that the institutions must support critical multicultural pedagogy through curricula in other courses, and hiring faculty of color.

While all these activities may advance a "liberating tolerance" (Marcuse, 1965), they may produce adult learner resistance as well. Sleeter (1996) and McIntyre (1997) note student resistance to looking at systemic oppression. In particular, they find that white students often become silent or change the subject when the analysis of racism changes from individual issues to an institutional level. Adult educators may need to direct the conversation in ways that are uncomfortable.

Challenge individual student's thinking individually through individual assignments and correspondence or conferences. Individual, asynchronous learning activities, whether through distance learning or as a part of a traditional course, are useful. When dealing with those who belong to dominant groups within our classes, we can more easily disempower them in one-to-one communication between teacher and student. Furthermore, individually completed assignments tended to be more thoughtful and critical of power and privilege than group completed assignments (Cale & Huber, 2001). Collective learning activities can be very helpful but can also result in the marginalized perspective becoming even more marginalized and the "white noise" (Barlas, et al, 2000) taking over.

Each of us has to find our own way to exorcise the hegemony of the "democratic" classroom. Like Baptiste (1998), we would ask those further along the journey to assist us in eliminating the repressive tolerance in our adult education classrooms.

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Gary Cale, Ed.D, Professor, Jackson Community College, 2111 Emmons Road, Jackson, MI 49201.

Conni Huber, Ed.D, Training and Development Coordinator, City Hall, 51 1st St. Bridge, Cedar Rapids, IA 52402.

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