

EDITORS' NOTES

This sourcebook emerges out of our long-standing commitment to critical adult education and our realization that critical perspectives are incredibly difficult to enact in the classroom. We have held many conversations about the practicality of critical pedagogy with our students and our colleagues in the field of adult education. We have participated in discussions at professional meetings about how to create a more critical practice of adult education, and we have listened to (and given) many presentations that are heavy on critique and light on practical, constructive action. We get the impression from these experiences that students and colleagues often understand the nature of critical approaches to education and why they are important but remain unsure what such approaches would look like in the classroom.

The situation is more complex because the grand theorists of criticality in North America, such as Michael Apple, Henry Giroux, and Peter McLaren, often write in mystifying (and somewhat unhelpful) language. It is also significant that the big names that fashioned classic critical pedagogy are all white men. All too often in education, the white men get the fashionable new theoretical clothing while others have to be content with trying to point out (with varying levels of success) that the emperors appear to be naked. We began to think it would be wonderful to capture the diversity of critical thought in adult education and present it in an accessible way that allowed for discussion of concrete issues and applications.

In this volume we use *critical perspectives* as an umbrella term to represent many different but basically like-minded approaches. Critical theory has come a long way since its emergence in the group of scholars forming the Frankfurt School some eighty years ago. The chapters in this sourcebook are based in diverse areas of thought including critical theory, feminism, critical postmodernism, Africentrism, queer theory, and cultural studies. Although individuals working with these different approaches might disagree, we see them as complementary. They are all concerned on some level with real material inequity and seek to link critique to action (praxis) by pursuing social change as a major goal of education. Hart (1990, p. 128) defines *critique* as “the process of investigating and denouncing social and individual damages caused by power.” Educators who subscribe to a critical perspective on adult education and on teaching adults all place “the issue of power or dominance relations at the center” of what they do (p. 126) and seek to move “beyond the technical rationality of current adult education practice” (Cunningham, 1992, p. 181). Critical educators are interested in power relations and societal inequalities; they have a “concern for forms of education which are liberating rather than merely adjusting, and which point to new possibilities for thought and action rather than fixate the learner to the status quo” (Hart, 1990, p. 125).

The idea that critical perspectives on teaching are difficult to put into place in the classroom is not new. One of the most influential articles reflecting these difficulties appeared years ago (Ellsworth, 1989). Although critical educators have tackled many of the issues that Ellsworth raised, the solutions are not easy, and we continue to grapple with these problems. We hope that critical adult educators can find in this volume both theoretical and practical knowledge that will help them to develop a meaningful critical pedagogy in their classrooms.

The overall impression that the chapters in this volume give is that critical teaching is at a crossroads. Scholars have challenged the apparent certainties of Marxist—and some Neo-Marxist—theory too convincingly for comfort. Oppression and injustice demonstrably exist, but the telescope we use to examine them presents a cloudy picture, with the microscope often giving a better view. People are oppressed not only from above but also from within, as their identity is created by and in turn creates the social structures around them. We have no option but to accept that our individual actions are oppressive to ourselves and to others. The idea of blaming an elite of capitalists is not so useful when we have nearly all become capitalists to some extent, through our mutual funds, our credit card balances, or our union's investments. The lack of clear distinctions between oppressors and oppressed is a major consideration as we consider whether to allow critical teaching to retreat into historical footnotes or to reconfigure it to reflect contemporary experience.

We believe the responses emerging in these pages point to the latter. The authors take seriously the challenge of material oppression but do not retreat to the answers found in the somewhat weary classic critical theory and critical pedagogy approaches to adult education. Rather, these writers grapple with how to create more critical practices of adult education within the realities of a late modern or postmodern world. They acknowledge the question of how to fight oppression in a postmodern world, where the moral certainty underlying the approaches of critical pedagogy based on critical theory is increasingly threadbare.

The chapters flow logically from those raising fundamental questions about the notion of critical teaching to those dealing with more specialized aspects of contemporary theory and practice. Critical theory and classic critical pedagogy do not get an easy ride in this volume. None of the authors suggests that a critical approach will solve the tangles of education in late modernity, and all openly admit the difficulty of critique in practice. The first chapter, by Alisa Belzer, does a great job of setting the stage, as she tells us about her struggles to create critical spaces within adult literacy education. This interesting and accessibly written preview of some of the major issues of the sourcebook has many insights of its own to offer.

Tom Nesbit's chapter makes a strong argument for the centrality of class in critical analysis. The roots of critical theory lie in questions about the distribution of wealth and poverty in a capitalist society, and Nesbit clearly and

helpfully lays out the materialism lying at the heart of critique. Marx's name does not often come up in contemporary adult education, and Nesbit does well to remind us that it should. Jennifer Sandlin also tackles the economic aspects of critique, though from a different angle. Her chapter extends critical analysis into consumerism and explores what it means to learn to be a responsible citizen-consumer in the early twenty-first century. The answer is more complex and challenging than one might expect.

Talking about critical theory and critical pedagogy without recognizing the existence of postmodern and poststructuralist ways of seeing the world would be difficult. Ralf St. Clair mentions some of the theoretical complexities of our postmodern times as he struggles with what it means to be a critical adult educator within the academy. His central point is the importance of viewing critical approaches as part of a living, changing tradition rather than as a moribund or monolithic one. Deborah Kilgore continues the theme of postmodernity and lays out a set of complicated issues very clearly, tying them to everyday practices. Kilgore challenges us to leave the traditional roles of student and teacher behind and embrace contemporary theory's multiple ways of thinking about these roles.

One of the areas of experience that recent critical writing recognizes is race, which both shapes and is shaped by the other dimensions of oppression and privilege. Ming-yeh Lee and Juanita Johnson-Bailey examine this topic as they explore their experience as academics and women of color trying to bring criticality to the academy. They consider the ways in which feminist pedagogy and being a woman of color can be a "dangerous liaison." Lisa Merriweather Hunn takes the topic of race further still and discusses the ideas contained within Africentric approaches to critical pedagogy. She describes what educators can do to move away from an unchallenged Eurocentric philosophy. Both these chapters describe how criticality and race intersect in mutually supportive—and sometimes not so supportive—ways.

The last three chapters continue to raise innovative challenges to rational, monolithic critical perspectives. Jamie Callahan considers the role emotions play in critical practice. Very often we overlook the emotional impact of challenging the realities our students and we take for granted, and Callahan provides a strong argument for incorporating emotions into critique. Robert Hill places critical theory alongside queer theory and in doing so demonstrates extremely well how bringing theoretical areas together can provide new and important insights. He argues against closed critique and suggests we must always keep our analysis open.

The final chapter is both pragmatic and challenging. Valerie-Lee Chapman focuses on the classroom and how to use autoethnography to create critical personal narratives. But these narratives are not only personal: containing within them the patterns of microstructures of power, they can help to reveal the wider social structures operating within and on our lives.

All of these chapters strongly challenge conventional views of criticality while refusing to step away from injustice and oppression. No author

suggests that we can do anything other than engage with the struggle for a better world, even if our theoretical stance is not as clear or consistent as we would like. This volume is ultimately about action, and action is essential to the process of social change.

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