

**Taking it to practice:
Building a critical postmodern theory of adult learning community**

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Abstract: This paper considers research themes important to contemporary Canadian federal HRD (human resource development) policy, research, and experimentation. It takes up security, work, and learning concerns affecting today's citizen workers and learners and develops aspects of a critical postmodern theory of adult learning community.

Introduction: We live, learn, and work in these changing times, often running on empty, and perhaps too complacent about the fragmentation, instability, and insecurity generated by the interplay of local and global change-force factors. In Canada, the trend toward high unemployment in recent decades continues, the nature of employment and its relationship to adult education alter, and temporary employment normalizes as the order of the day for many citizen workers. Canadians wonder about the abilities of government and education to solve the array of social and economic problems reducing the quality of everyday life. In these times of transition, too many people have been pushed on to a *knowledge-for-now* training treadmill that provides skills with short-lived utility and marketability. A new class is emerging as sociotechnological change and economic downturns force citizen workers into survival mode, into subjection, into compliance with government and corporate agendas. Their work lives are fragmented into periods in which the skills they learn enable them to be employed for just a time before they return to slip and slide on the instrumental-learning treadmill. There they learn new skills required for tomorrow's jobs, skills already doomed to obsolescence. The ultimate socioeconomic return of this dehumanizing training travesty is an alienated contingent of functionally unemployable persons whose self-esteem and self-confidence are battered (Grace, in press). This situation seems hard to resolve in light of a pervasive, contemporary conservative ethic that erodes the social in its concern with the economic. This ethic, melding the social and the economic, fails to address the life, learning, and work issues of Canadian citizens in respectful and meaningful ways (Grace, in press).

In proposing research themes for a human resources development agenda to guide its future strategic planning of policy research and experimentation projects, Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) projected in 1994 that policy development in the anticipated future would be based on the assumption that economic and social policy will continue to be brought closer together. HRDC presented a research thematic framework that it subdivided into foci on the worlds of security, work, and learning. This framework aims to achieve homeostasis among these worlds as it takes a holistic view of citizens' lives. It points out the increasing

complexity of individual education and work patterns in institutions including households, markets, communities, and governments. As HRDC makes its case for *lifelong learning* in these times, we can hear the reverberation of the voices of Roby Kidd, Alan Thomas, and other adult educators who have promoted the concept in the era of modern practice:

Education is no longer an exclusively once in a lifetime, full-time experience reserved for the young. The increasing complexity of school-work transitions and the combination of work and education present numerous challenges. ... The changing life cycle of learning merits close examination. (HRDC, 1994, p. 29)

This learning journey is fraught with problems. HRDC itself acknowledges certain failures of government and education. Gender remains a significant issue: "Precarious and part-time work is more likely to be held by women, and labour market segregation by sex remains the current workplace reality for major segments of the labour market" (p. 12). The marginalized still struggle to swim in mainstream currents. Access to adult education continues to follow the post-World War II trend: The better educated you are, the more likely you are to participate in continuing education. On the cusp of a new millennium, HRDC reiterates the call for a better understanding of the social exclusion phenomenon, its determinants, and the patterns of work, learning, and family structure of marginalized populations? In the face of this call, one wonders what progress we have made since war was declared on poverty over one quarter century ago. One also worries about bothersome subtexts associated with this call. For example, HRDC's concern with investing in children is caught up in a traditional understanding of family that blatantly demeans the diversity in contemporary family structures and assaults the family-and-work culture of single-parent families as a recipe for juvenile delinquency and other social problems.

The contemporary melding of the social and the economic demands that Canadian adult education rethink and revise its forms and functions. We might begin by asking: Does adult education, itself in a state of flux in today's change culture, have a recognized and useful presence (a space) and a respected and valued position (a place) in society? We might also ask: How can adult educators move beyond the survivalist strategies and reactive stances shaping our learning culture? In times when lifelong learning is codified as HRD, how do we develop policies and programs that respect and honor learner identity-differences? How can adult educators operating in critical, HRD, and other modes form linkages with one another and foster an encompassing, reflexive practice of adult education? Answers to these questions might begin by turning to history, by investigating the socioeconomic complexities shaping contemporary life, learning, and work, and by recognizing that theory and practice must be mutually informative in enterprise building.

Building a Critical Postmodern Theory of Adult Learning Community: With this understanding in mind, this paper now considers five notions important to a critical postmodern Theory of Adult Learning Community (TALC and pronounced *talk*): 1) TALC emphasizes community by fostering new relationships among adult educators and learners where engagement and challenge proceed from the mutual recognition, respect, and valuing of one another's roles; 2) TALC focuses on knowledge production, not knowledge consumption, and

values knowledge informed by experience and disposition; 3) TALC addresses issues of language, form, and accessibility in theory development as it considers how theory and practice can inform one another; 4) TALC draws on the foundations of adult education and emphasizes the importance of a philosophical rationale and the historical context in shaping an interdisciplinary enterprise; and, 5) TALC asks adult educators to use these ideas to invigorate forms of adult education that address the instrumental, social, *and* cultural concerns of people living in a contemporary change culture of crisis and challenge.

Theme 1 - TALC Emphasizes Community: Learning in community is the underlying premise of J. J. Tompkins's adult education and cooperation model used in the Antigonish Movement (Grace, 1995). The pedagogy of the people embodied and embedded in this movement challenged people to think, study, and act as a learning community that could work together to solve its own social and economic problems. We can take this pedagogy into today and raise issues of voice and power as we investigate conflicting interests impacting work and education agendas. This shapes the learning community as a political place where empowerment and action demand a collective engagement with educator and learner cultures, situations, dispositions, experiences, and histories. Contexts and relations of power are taken up in an exploration of the textures of work and education that influence the informing and transforming of individuals.

TALC invigorates classroom practice by recognizing and fostering teaching and learning as dynamically interactive political acts. In classrooms adult educators and learners *both* take up roles as investigators, challengers, communicators, knowledge producers, and enablers in the teaching-learning process. The adult educator is no longer merely a facilitator or a human resource person. Collins (1991), advancing a proactive role for adult educators, has these critically reflective participants in the teaching-learning process address concerns with methodology, technique, and performativity within a broader framework that raises questions of purpose, interests, contexts, and assumptions underlying utility (see Brookfield, 1995, for examples of this practice). Engaging in this critical practice means that educators assist students to understand how contexts and relations of power shape life, learning, work, and their possibilities. Jansen and Klercq (1992) relate, "The positions and experiences of participants of learning processes cannot be isolated from their integration into larger political, economic and cultural connections, which not only leave their marks on their concrete experiences but which also to a large extent determine which experiences and interpretations of the world are acknowledged and which are marginalized" (pp. 99-100). Using TALC, adult educators and learners shape classrooms as places to think, deliberate, study, understand, and lay a foundation for action. There they, as people with particular dispositions and experiences, question and ask questions about the questions. They let their voices be heard, voices that can be engaged and, when necessary, be challenged.

Theme 2 - TALC Focuses on Knowledge Production: TALC views knowledge as a social and cultural construct caught up in contexts and relations of power. It considers knowledge production to be intimately connected to questions of voice and value in adult education. To maximize its merit, TALC argues that this production must be as much about experience and disposition as it is about facts and techniques. It is concerned with a key question: How do adult educators and learners produce knowledge that reflects an enterprise where learner locatedness is recognized, respected, and fostered? TALC addresses this question mindful of the rapid pace of

knowledge production, exchange, and distribution in contemporary times and aware that "the kind of knowledge that is considered high status ... is strongly related to those groups with economic and cultural power in the larger society" (Apple, 1992, p. 785). It acknowledges that many learners come to adult education classrooms with an inferiority complex perpetuated by the continuous effort to cope with new-skill ignorance and keep pace on the instrumental-learning treadmill. In today's knowledge economy learners need to understand that *knowledge is for now* and its facts and *how to* descriptions are carefully controlled. The learning experience is reduced to episodic skill acquisition (Bauman, 1992). It is a partial and transitional encounter in a cycle of learning for the moment.

This scenario is normalized by the contemporary melding of the social and the economic and by "the increasing importance of the knowledge economy and its associated productivity-increasing technologies in the areas of electronics, computers, communications and robotics" (HRDC, 1994, p. 12). The intensity and rapidity of knowledge production too often make citizen workers and learners easy prey to educational forms serving government and corporate techno-economic agendas that devalue people. TALC challenges us to address this issue and infuse contemporary adult education practice with sociological critiques of science and expert knowledge (see, for example, Bauman, 1992; Beck, 1992) that help educators and learners frame instrumental concerns within a broader, reflexive practice.

Theme 3 - TALC Considers How Theory and Practice Can Inform One Another: Since World War II, the emergence of modern practice has been encumbered by the ambiguity between adult education as a field of study and adult education as a field of practice (Schroeder, 1970). This ambiguity limits possibilities for theory and practice to significantly inform one another. TALC seeks to build theory-practice connections in the Freire (1993) sense that when it comes to theory and practice, one cannot negate the other for its own sake. Freire "advocate[s] neither a theoretic elitism nor a practice ungrounded in theory; but the unity between theory and practice" (p. 23). TALC holds the reflexive views that practice is theory lived out in the everyday and that theory comes alive when it is critiqued, challenged, and built upon. It follows suit with Collins (1991): "It is not so much a matter of trying to put theory into practice as of critically engaging with it while we try to put ourselves into practice" (p. 109).

TALC takes up language and meaning issues, focuses on presences and absences in theoretical discourses, and brings theory to bear on identity-differences shaped by relations of power. It focuses on theorizing as an active process informing practices aimed at meeting learner needs, addressing access concerns, achieving equity, and fostering human diversity. TALC encourages educators and learners to theorize and to engage and challenge one another respectfully. It values conflict over silence because it is a sign of interaction: someone is speaking *and* someone is listening. It asks educators and learners to resolve conflict by being authentic, making connections, and learning communicatively.

Theme 4 - TALC Values The Foundations of Adult Education: The modern practice of adult education has been variously critiqued for its inattention to its sociological, philosophical, and historical foundations. Since the 1980s, a valuing of the foundations of adult education is increasingly discernible in the field. TALC turns to the foundations to inform theory building, research, and reflexive practices. It purports that valuing an interdisciplinary approach to theory-

research-practice helps educators and learners to problematize the contemporary melding of the social and the economic and to create pedagogical possibilities for moving classroom practice into the intersection where the instrumental and the transformative are both considerations. For example, the social history of adult education is importantly considered here. This history helps us to understand our present place and difference by giving us a sense of the change-force factors that have shaped contemporary adult education. It reveals the tensions between elements of the enterprise that maintain the status quo and other elements that seek to change it. It helps us gain perspectives on what is possible in an enterprise where the learning culture has been texturized by a faith in social progress and economic prosperity, at least as they are understood by the dominant culture.

Theme 5 - TALC Values Instrumental, Social, and Cultural Forms of Adult Education: In the contemporary change culture of crisis and challenge, adult education's usefulness and worth could lie in further shaping itself as an enterprise that honors human diversity and provides space and place for instrumental, social, *and* cultural forms of education. TALC recognizes that since the genesis of the modern practice of adult education, instrumental, social, and cultural forms of education have *all* been variously explored and valued within the field. The enterprise has drawn on instrumental understandings of practice including Knowles's (1970) delineation of andragogy and Verner's (1961/1963) concern for precision, demonstrated in his work on adult educational method, device, and technique. It has explored Lindeman's notion that "true adult education is social education" (1947 in Brookfield, 1987, p. 55). It has considered adult education as cultural education which Echeverría (1983) tells us can enable "the transformation of the world for an authentic development" (p. 37). TALC values the convergence of these forms of education in the midst of contemporary sociotechnological change and economic ebb tides. It argues that social and cultural educators can never be fully insulated and isolated from technicians who also carry out front-line work in the enterprise. It argues that it is in the sum of these educational forms - "instruction in bread-winning" (Nietzsche, 1964, p. ix) plus social and cultural education - that adult education has value for life, learning, and work.

While TALC holds with Finger (1991) that we must "conceive of adult education practice in a broader perspective than one of technical training" (p. 134), it realizes that bread-and-butter issues are front and center for citizen workers and learners in today's socioeconomic milieu. Thus instrumental forms of education must be given space and place in an inclusionary, reflexive practice of adult education. TALC, however, texturizes the technical, agreeing with Collins's (1991) contention that while the critically reflective adult educator can use technique, this educator does so within a framework emphasizing that the term vocation has both ethical and practical components. He declares, "Ethically based and practical orientations provide a context from which rational, non-coercive, decision-making about the relevant incorporation of technique can be carried out" (p. 42). TALC purports that enterprise homeostasis requires contributions by instrumental, social, and cultural forms of education so that adult education impacts on citizens as a social and cultural movement *and* as an enterprise responsibly executing instrumental functions within an inclusive and reflexive practice. Jansen and Van Der Veen (1992) concur: They argue that a critical practice for contemporary times must "(re)integrate the teaching and learning of practical skills and knowledge that people need for daily living with the stimulation of questions and public debate about the future of society and the possible designs of individual and social life" (p. 281).

TALCing Theory-Research-Practice: So often shaped by its tendency to ignore theory and its desire to plunge into practice, what has adult education done for ordinary citizen workers and learners in the everyday? And what does the fact that adult education still struggles for space and place reveal about the success of enterprise efforts? How many real steps has adult education taken to advance the causes of Others such as single mothers often marginalized in the intersection of race and gender? How well has the enterprise examined the social and economic connections explored in the work of Jimmy Tompkins, Malcolm X, and other social educators and activists? TALC asks us to embrace ethics, justice, and the realities of social hierarchies and relations of power. It encourages us to take up these issues as a learning community sensitive to inclusion/exclusion issues. TALC demands that we develop new curricula that break the chain of constancy with which adult education curricula have functioned in social reproduction and the maintenance of patterns of social inequality in society (see Griffin, 1991). It asks us to highlight concerns with identity-difference, language, and meaning as we think, study, and act in the spirit of the Antigonish Movement. TALC asks us to consider ways in which adult education can be used to shape a pedagogy of the people that takes up the living, learning, and work issues of citizens in the everyday.

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