The Intersecting Roles of Religion, Culture, and Spirituality in Emancipatory Adult Education

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Abstract: *This paper discusses why considering the intersection of religion, spirituality, and culture is important in emancipatory education efforts and provides discussion of approaches for doing so in practice.*

There has been much discussion about emancipatory education over the years. Most who discuss it cite the well-known work of Brazilian activist educator, Paulo Freire, who described himself as a "man of faith" (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 245) strongly influenced by the liberation theology movement in Latin America. There has been some attention to the role of spirituality in the roots of activist educators such as Freire, Horton, and M.L. King, and in discussions of culturally responsive and emancipatory adult education (English, 2005; Tisdell, 2003). Yet, with some exception (e.g., Charaniya & West Walsh, 2001) there has been relatively little direct attention to *religion* in the theorizing or practice of emancipatory education discourses. We believe that attention to both religion and spirituality can be an important component to emancipatory education, particularly in a post 9/11 world which has brought unwarranted fear of Muslims and targeting of those who appeared different based on religion as well as color and culture. Thus*,* our purpose here is two-fold: first to contextualize our views on why the intersection of spirituality, religion, and culture is important to emancipatory education in a post 9-11 world; and then to discuss how we deal with spirituality and religion together and apart in our educational practices in light of our unique personal stories and educational context. We do so as four women of different cultural and religious backgrounds: an Indo African British Canadian American Muslim woman (Charaniya); an Ashkenazi Jewish woman (Walsh); an African American woman ordained Baptist minister (Brown-Haywood); and a white woman grounded primarily in the Christian social gospel with influences from other spiritual traditions (Tisdell). We also draw on our recent co-authored chapter dealing with religion, spirituality, and culture in feminist popular education (edited by Walters & Manicom, forthcoming).

Why Religion/Spirituality is Important to Emancipatory Education

There is an emerging body of literature within adult education that either directly discusses spirituality or religion in the lives of research participants (Charaniya & West Walsh, 2004; English, 2005; Tisdell, 2000, 2003) or recognizes it as something participants in various studies find important (e.g., Merriam & Ntseane, 2008). There is some discussion among social justice educators outside the field who discuss the increasing importance of attending to spiritual and religious diversity in a post 9/11world (Farkas & Hutchinson-Hall, 2005). Some do so building on the work of Harvard Religious Pluralism Project director Diana Eck (2001) through interfaith dialogue efforts, others making their own way theoretically based on intercultural theory, theology, or critical and feminist pedagogies (Gumucio, 2008). Still others focus more on the role of spiritual and cultural expression in the pedagogical process as an important part of

activist education and engagement with cultural imagination (Fernandes, 2003; hooks, 2003; Tisdell, 2007). Many writers, particularly people of color, have been calling for attention to spirituality and other ways of knowing in research, theory, and practice as a way to help people claim their internal sense of power that grounds social action while fostering a sense of hope. This is a point that Dillard (2006) makes in putting forth her ideas of an "endarkened feminist epistemology." Fernandes (2003) suggests that without it, feminist activists often feel a sense of hopelessness, and suggests that by activating spirituality, activists can transform themselves and foster a sense of hope and creativity that leads to action. Similarly, David Abalos (1998) talks about the importance of "freeing the sacred face" in his ideas on teaching for transformation.

Following the work of these educators, we believe that attending to spirituality and religion in emancipatory education is important for a number of reasons. First, in a world that is increasingly defined by the events of 9/11 and inter-religious/inter-cultural conflicts in many parts of the world, conversations about social justice are by their very nature influenced by people's beliefs, which often come from their socialization around religion and culture. Secondly, even those who do not explicitly identify a particular religious belief or stance as being a catalyst for their social justice efforts, are influenced by their worldview, which is usually influenced by views of those who are different (which includes differences in religious beliefs and/or spiritual outlooks). Third, to ignore the role of these basic beliefs is to leave a cavernous void and potentially undermine efforts toward social justice. Finally, as our experience has shown, people are moved and motivated by their religious and spiritual beliefs and adding consideration of these beliefs is to harness a potentially potent force for social justice.

With this as a justification then, in the following discussion about religion and spirituality in emancipatory education, we make the following assumptions: (1) that religion (an organized community of faith), and spirituality (an individual experience of what is referred to by many as "God", "life force", "interconnecting web", or "divine spirit") are not the same, but for many people they are interrelated; (2) that both *religion* and *spirituality* as forms of knowing are related to what faith development theorist, James Fowler (1982) refers to as "unconscious and symbolic knowledge construction processes"; symbol is nearly always mediated and expressed through culture; therefore religion and spirituality must be considered in light of culture, and have a place in culturally responsive and emancipatory education; (3) that it is important to consider power relations based on *religion* in emancipatory education efforts in a post 9/11 world, and direct attention to dealing specifically with religion is in course content or curriculum; (4) that potentially attending to spirituality as a way of knowing is more pedagogical, in that making pedagogical use of how people construct knowledge and make further meaning through symbolic knowledge construction processes through music, metaphor, or art facilitates a sense of creativity and a sense of hope that some experience as related to spirituality; (5) that it is desirable in emancipatory education to facilitate creativity and hope.

Our Educational Work in Context

How we draw on our own spirituality and/or religious background depends on our own story in regard to spirituality, religion and culture, and the context of our educational work. Here we briefly discuss our approaches in light of our own cultural and religious backgrounds.

Libby Tisdell: Engaging Cultural Imagination

I am a Euro-American white woman who currently works primarily as an Adult Education professor teaching graduate students at a secular research university, though I do some emancipatory education work drawing on religion and spirituality in the community as well. Discussion of religion tends to be content-oriented or curricular while dealing with spirituality and the engagement of cultural imagination tends to be more pedagogical. The interrelated theoretical strands discussed above guide my thinking, as well as the research that I've done of the role of spirituality and religion among emancipatory educators discussed elsewhere (Tisdell, 2003, 2007). I have been dealing with spirituality and religion in my educational practice for a long time, but it was my cohort of Latino students when teaching in Chicago (from 1998-2002) who taught me the importance of engaging "the sacred face" in activist educational work.

In any educational context that involves multiple sessions, whether in higher education or community settings, I draw on religion in the content of what I teach if it is relevant. I draw on spirituality and cultural imagination by bringing symbols of the elements of the world—earth, wind, fire, and water, as well as other symbols of culture and knowing that might be appropriate to the particular setting, and encourage students to do the same at different points in the course. For example, when sharing aspects of their cultural stories in light of an assignment where they are to analyze how social structures based on gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and religion have shaped their cultural identity as well as their beliefs and values, I ask learners to share a symbol of their cultural identity. This sharing of these cultural symbols, which are sometimes religious as well as cultural, are always noted as among the most important aspects of the session by the participants. Attention to symbol touches on the spiritual for some people; others do not map to such activities in that way. In later sessions, I continue to draw on symbol, metaphor, music, or poetry to engage in creative or artistic representation to engage cultural imagination, and to draw on knowledge on a deeper level. This sense of creative engagement IS part of taking action, and part of engaging the work of transformation, which has implications both for individual and social transformation, as Abalos (1998) and Fernandes (2003) suggest. I find that over time, it can also keep those who attempt to work for social justice from degenerating into depression, hopelessness, and non-action.

Felicia Brown-Haywood: Black Spirituals as a Way to Healing

I am an African American woman who serves as an adult educator in multiple contexts: including in the university, in my own religious community and in the wider community. My social location as a Black female, adult educator, ordained minister serving a Black Baptist church, and a sought-after hired vocalist has spawned within me the desire to research the richness and the opportunity to perform Black Spiritual songs for the purpose of facilitating community-based socio-cultural learning creating a sacred context. Being born a Black female of African descent in America has peppered my life's journey with experiences steeped in systemic power relations and a partially internalized racist and sexist mindset propagated by the dominant culture (Cannon, 1996; West, 2008).I was the first in my immediate family to attend college and to earn an undergraduate, a graduate and a seminary degree. My mother (now 88) who raised my brothers and I alone values education; her mantra is "you must gain the marketplace education so that you can free yourself to be successful in the marketplace." Her teaching is not monolithic; while she taught us to be partakers at the marketplace she also warned us not to be stricken with cultural amnesia.

I have learned many lessons from my market place experience. Those lessons pertinent to this discussion have to do with the voiceless in and on the periphery of the market place. Women, the poor, the disabled, and the racially different, are all present but silenced. I also became aware that until our voices become an integral part of the marketplace the greatest potential of both the people and the society cannot be realized. The ills of our society are manifested through the voice of pain and the cry for unity and understanding about the human condition. It is the recognition of such pain that has created spaces around the table of hope. Enlisting the conceptual elements of experiential education and transformative learning, I created a workshop entitled "Singing My Way Through in Sacred Face: The Healing Properties of Black Sacred Music. This workshop draws on my own cultural and religious background, my cultural imagination, as well as and the music in my own soul, all of which I experience as spiritual in that it comes from deep within. Tapping into this well of knowing is a way that I create and share a deep meaning-making process, which, in my experience, helps others cross cultural and religious borders at the same time that they facilitate their own healing. The workshop is grounded in two primary beliefs: that the creation and singing of Spirituals gives voice to the human condition; and that liberated voice can serve as a tool of transformation healing and hope. There are four stages of the workshop, which are: 1) *Creating Voice, 2) Applying the Healing Voice, 3) Moving to Action, 4) Next Steps.* While the foundational tenets of this workshop are grounded in an African American faith tradition, its transformative and healing properties can be applied whatever our ancestral lineage since suffering and pain are part of the human condition and touches all of us at a universally.

Nadira Charaniya and Jane West Walsh: Interreligious Collaborators

Having conducted a collaborative research study together as a Muslim educator and a Jewish educator exploring the nature of adult learning in the interreligious dialogue process, we have found that the collaborative, relational, and symbolic learning that occurs when people of different religious beliefs get together to learn about each, from each other, can be a catalyst for social action (Charaniya & West Walsh, 2001). Like a 'pool of water' (p. 249), the interchange that takes place through interreligious dialogue can rejuvenate those who may be fatigued or challenge those who may be complacent. Our experience has shown that when people with differing religious beliefs come together in a discussion where those differences are an explicit component of the dialogue, there is an increased likelihood of understanding, compassion, and willingness to act on behalf of the 'other;' an increased likelihood of social action.

One way in which to foster dialogue which attends to participant beliefs is through the use of an approach called Collaborative Inquiry Metaphor Creation and Analysis Method (CIMCAM), which emerged as a data collection tool in our own research. Building on our own existing experiences in our respective arenas and on the work of Milgrom on "handmade Midrash" (1992), we used a cycle of reflection, creation, exploration, and collaborative analysis to help participants to go beyond what they might share through simple verbal sharing. We wanted participants to attempt to bring ideas they may hold about their interreligious dialogue experiences into the shared space of the focus group, in the form of visual or graphic metaphors. The content of what we wanted the participants to talk about was their interreligious dialogue experience. But how we engaged them in making further meaning relates more to pedagogy.

The five basic steps of CIMCAM (further details of which are discussed in Charaniya & West Walsh, 2000) are summarized below. Each step is dependent on the one before:

1) General discussion about the experience, concept or idea that the metaphors are to reflect.
2) Introduction to the specific arts materials with which the metaphors will be created and, when necessary, a warm-up exercise and words of encouragement to reassure those least confident about their artistic abilities that the process is the central focus, not the specific artistic product.
3) Creation of the visual metaphor.
4) Sharing in small groups.
5) Collaborative inquiry and analysis of the metaphors, seeking how they relate visually and symbolically to one another, what parallels in color, shape, form or theme emerge, and discussion of what further meaning might be gleaned from seeing them juxtaposed this way and, possibly, creation of a shared meaning as a result of this process.

We propose that CIMCAM is an adult education methodology conducive to both emancipatory education practice and research. Adult educators working in popular settings can also successfully use CIMCAM to foster dialogue about religious and spiritual aspects of participants' lives. It can also take some participants to almost a sacred level in that it enables them to go beyond a cognitive awareness of things to a preconscious and esoteric exploration as they identify, share, and reinterpret an image to capture the nature of their experience. CIMCAM is a powerful model for application to explicitly draw in religiously and/or spiritually held beliefs within the context of social justice education.

While we made use of the CIMCAM process in our research project, we've also used it in other settings. For example, as an instructor at Springfield College's School of Human Services, Nadira has used CIMCAM to establish common identity between students who are embarking on a 16-month collaborative action research community project as part of their requirements for the degree. She also uses this approach as a way of giving voice to the many divergent experiences and attitudes about student educational experiences within a required course that examines the issue of oppression and empowerment through social institutions, such as education. In the context of her community work, she has used CIMCAM in explorations of what it means to be a Muslim in post- 9-11 America and what it means to live with a pluralist stance. The technique is particularly appropriate when working with a group of people of the same faith but from different cultural backgrounds. In this context, where one might assume that beliefs are shared, the diversity of interpretations that comes out, and the corresponding understanding, is powerful. The sense of interdependence and shared community that emerges as a result of the CIMCAM process, regardless of the context of use, is spiritual in the sense that it taps into unconscious processes where people make new meaning on a deeper level that many of the authors cited suggest can tap into what is spiritual and sacred. Touching on what is sacred for people at the deepest levels, as a result of being in the 'pool', certainly offers people hope and can help move them to action on behalf of themselves and others.

Conclusion

We believe that a consideration of religion and spirituality is important to emancipatory education, though dialogue across difference will serve to facilitate what this looks like in theory and practice as it unfolds. While not necessarily apparent here due to space limitations, we have had many interesting interreligious discussions that not only reflect our diverse ethnic and religious histories and identities, but have also taken us to a deeper understanding of both religion and spirituality in the educational process. Jane has taught us more about the power of

Midrash, and in her Jewish wisdom, has drawn attention to how the sacred is present in the space between us as we discuss religion and spirituality. Felicia has taught us the wonders of using the voice in a way that is both culturally specific and culturally universal, and what it means for women and mothers to be cultural carriers and cultural translators. Nadira has taught us the power of what it means to educate so that people can have a pluralistic experience in a narrow minded society that propagates lies about Muslim people, the power of acting in spite of adversity, on someone else's behalf. Libby gathered and created a learning community of us as diverse women to work on the feminist popular education chapter together to engage our cultural imagination and to have this experience together, and then to take it to AERC. All of these components (gathering a diverse community; finding voice in a new way through music, symbol, mystery, Midrash, dialogue; drawing on individual and collective wisdom; taking action on behalf of ourselves and others) are important to the work of emancipatory education. The experience itself has been a part of our own our spiritual and interreligious journey. We hope that the methodologies offered and the dialogues it may provoke, facilitates a similar journey for those who gather together around the Table of Hope, and take action in the world.

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