

The Kitchen Table: Alternative Perspectives on Program Planning

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Abstract: *The literature on program planning in adult education has been dominated by the technical-rational perspectives of a largely white, male, North American group of scholars. We note why this gap is problematic for the field and introduce a new generative metaphor, the kitchen table. This metaphor opens up a space for deliberation about aesthetic and feminist considerations, as well as directing attention to non-Western approaches, particularly ideas about community collaboration from an Indigenous perspective.*

The Problem and Our Method

Cervero and Wilson (2006) and Sork and Newman (2004), among other program planning theorists in adult education, have noted the importance of metaphors (particularly the idea of “working the planning table”), how power and interests operate, and whether planning processes are democratic and the programs created are life affirming. At the heart of these questions is a concern with the limitations of the technical-rational step-by-step models that have dominated the field. Sork (2000) has also noted that the literature is dominated by white (western European background) males from North America and wondered why program planning is not central to adult education theorizing in other areas of the world. He also asks why there are no feminists offering their views on planning, and why aesthetics matters in planning. This void is problematic because feminist critiques provide valuable insights into the taken-for-granted assumptions and gender-bias embedded in both theory and practice.

This paper is one response to this problem. It begins with an alternative metaphor that signals a feminist as well as aesthetic sensibility and one that is life affirming. The metaphor at the centre of this conceptual exploration is the kitchen table. As feminist poet and member of the Muskogee Tribe, Joy Harjo (1997) notes in her poem *Perhaps the World Ends Here*, “The world begins at a kitchen table. No matter what, we must eat to live. The gifts of earth are brought and prepared, set on the table. So it has been since creation, and it will go on.” Harjo also notes that the kitchen table can also be “a house in the rain, an umbrella in the sun” and a place for sorrow and celebration. The kitchen table invokes different visions depending on one’s cultural location; for many cultures there is no kitchen table, at least the image of one that comes to mind from a Western North American standpoint.

This is a work in progress, a journey and search for ideas from alternative spaces, ones not commonly linked with program planning in adult education. Our approach is a kind of bricolage, the idea of using what is at hand. Kincheloe (2001) speaks of this approach as multiperspectival. Social science, he claims, must “operate in the ruins of the temple, in a postapocalyptic social, cultural psychological and educational science where certainty and stability have long departed for parts unknown ... the research bricoleurs pick up the pieces of what’s left and paste them together as best they can” (p. 681). So we offer here some pieces that help us think differently about program planning. Most particularly, as noted above, we have

searched for ideas that help us move towards a sense of planning as an aesthetic, creative, democratic and life affirming process.

Aesthetics of Program Planning

We begin this section on the aesthetics of planning with a quotation from Shaker design philosophy: “Don’t make something unless it is both necessary and useful; but if it is both necessary and useful, don’t hesitate to make it beautiful.” Although this philosophy is most often applied to everyday objects, we suggest invoking it as a principle to guide educational design because it challenges planners to weave an aesthetic sensibility (appreciation of beauty) into their practice. There is nothing inherently “feminist” about aesthetics but we argue here that incorporating aesthetics into planning theory—and planning practice—will make it a more inviting place for women. However, it is possible to draw from the literature some distinctly feminist views about aesthetics. For example, according to Worth (2001),

Feminist aesthetics...claims that good art is challenging but makes life sensible to its audience. Good art often transcends its particular culture and suggests alternative ways of being and understanding the world. Whereas formalist theories make hard and fast distinctions between aesthetic versus moral versus epistemological ways of looking and assessing, feminist theory suggests that aesthetic value arises in *conjunction* with the moral and epistemological and not in opposition to them. (p. 442-443)

Viewing program planning through the lens of aesthetics breaks from the technical-rational tradition and opens new possibilities for understanding the artistry of planning and the beauty of programs.

In adult education, we take great pride in designing programs that are in some sense necessary and useful. In conventional planning theory, programs are planned in response to needs articulated by learners (or others) so programs are instrumental to meeting needs, making them necessary and useful to someone. Conventional planning theory is based on technical rationality which assumes it is possible—and desirable—to clearly articulate expected outcomes and craft learning activities likely to produce those outcomes. A “good” program is therefore a set of experiences that produce expected learning outcomes. We are suggesting this is, at best, a simplistic and limiting understanding of what a “good” program is. We are not discounting the importance of effectiveness as a key feature of programs, but are suggesting that a new analytical lens is needed that builds on earlier work intended to foreground important features of planning and of programs.

Planning and programs as aesthetic experiences. Forty years ago, Knowles (1970) wrote about “the far out notion of adult education as an art form” (p. 129) and proceeded to discuss the principles of “line,” “space,” “tone,” “color,” and “texture” as they relate to the design of programs. Limited as it was to the visual, this notion was not taken up in our theorizing about planning, possibly because it would have disrupted the dominance of technical rationality. Denying (or ignoring) the central role of aesthetic experience in our lives may be another reason why women’s voices have largely been absent from this literature. But what would planning theory look like that acknowledged the importance of aesthetics and treated planning and programs as aesthetic experiences? Certainly, it would employ different language and different metaphors. It would also speak to different criteria for judging programs.

Discerning aesthetic properties and making aesthetic judgments. Just as art/theatre/movie/food critics employ a unique vocabulary to describe and judge aesthetic experiences, we need a similar vocabulary to do this work in adult education. What properties should we focus on when describing the aesthetics of programs? What vocabulary can we use that avoids gender-biased, masculinist perceptions and judgments? What metaphors and similes can we employ in analysis that bring deeper understanding and avoid facile characterizations? We are not suggesting that a concern with aesthetics replace other analytical categories, but only that aesthetics be given a meaningful place in our theorizing.

Cultivating a “signature aesthetic.” Just as chefs-in-training are challenged to create a signature dish that demonstrates their culinary artistry, we argue that planners should be challenged to create a “signature aesthetic” that demonstrates their educational artistry...both in terms of the planning process and product. Process and product will be experienced in a way that sets them apart from the unexceptional, the mundane, the average. Both will be “effective” in the technical-rational sense, but both will also be beautiful in the Shaker sense. What this signature aesthetic will be and how it will be experienced by participants are more difficult to describe. Just as works of artistry are experienced and judged differently depending on the point of reference of the critic, our signature aesthetic will also be judged differently. But the prospect of being criticized for the artful programs we create should not cause us to retreat into the mundane. This will require courage of the same kind that other artists demonstrate when their creations challenge conventional understandings, assumptions and sensibilities.

Feminist, Non-Western and Indigenous Approaches

Several key ideas from feminist scholarship are drawn upon to further enhance this metaphor of the kitchen table as a site of deliberation and nourishment including feminist approaches to community organizing and feminist considerations of coalition politics and working with difference. Non-Western approaches and Indigenous approaches are also considered.

Women-centred organizing: Stoll and Stoecker (1998) offer an important challenge to traditional approaches to community organizing which have been mostly a male preserve. Despite efforts to move towards participatory democratic processes, the dominant orientation, as reflected in the ideas of Saul Alinsky, focuses on the public sphere (ignoring the private) where the struggle involves manipulation (not cooperation) and a kind of “forceful masculinity” akin to what is found in competitive sports (in contrast to an ethic of caring). These authors explore what can be learned about community organizing from women’s grass roots activities. Women’s organizing, often foundational to social movements, occurs in both the private sphere of the home and in the public sphere thus disrupting the firm boundaries between public and private. While the Alinsky model suggests that organizers must appeal to the self interests and be concerned with individual rights, women-centred organizing is founded on a more collectivist sensibility informed by an ethic of care. This is evident in “othermothers,” women in Black communities who fought together for the welfare of the entire neighborhood (Collins, 1991). Women-centred approaches to community organizing do not focus on compromises amongst self-interested individuals, but on “practical reciprocity in the network of relationships that make up a community” (Stall & Stoecker, 1998, p. 739). The caring approach and the private and public spheres that women operate in were evident in Chovanec’s (2009) research into women’s organizing during the revolution in Chile.

Building coalitions: Another key arena of feminist theorizing that speaks to an alternative vision of program planning is the building of coalitions that requires attention to differences and diversity amongst women and men. As Sherene Razack (1993) notes: “To reach each other across our differences or to resist patriarchal and racist constructs, we must overcome at least one difficulty: the difference in position between the teller and the listener, between telling the tale and hearing it” (p. 36). Audre Lorde (1984) poet, activist and scholar, is well known for her challenge to white middle class feminists to recognize and work creatively with difference. “It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept and celebrate those differences.” Bernice Johnson Reagon (1983), also an activist and artist (songwriter), described coalitions as necessary, but always uncomfortable, and because of the discomfort, women of colour need to also have a home place to return to. Iris Marion Young (1990, p. 301), exploring the struggles around difference, argued that a desire for unity “generates borders, dichotomies and exclusions”. Difference is central to democratic dialogue; and understanding it means recognizing its relational dimensions and how it is socially constructed within relations of advantage and disadvantage (Young, 1997). Coalition work, given women’s different race, class, sexuality, and culture, are not external to feminist politics (Nicholson, 1994), but rather integral where there is a “coming together of those who want to work around the needs of women where such a concept is not understood as necessarily singular in meaning or commonly agreed upon” (p. 102).

Non-Western and Indigenous Approaches: Shifting away from the techno-rational model towards a more holistic, feminist and aesthetic orientation can be richly informed by non-Western and Indigenous orientations of planning and learning (Merriam, 2007). Program planning, like other elements of adult education, is a culturally embedded process, a factor that in Western dominant cultures is often ignored (Sparks & Butterwick, 2004). Culture, however, is a powerful dimension of the context in which adult learning occurs. One common understanding is that it refers to the “shared values, attitudes, beliefs, behaviours, and language use within a social group ... powerful factors that shape or influence individual attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours” (Guy, 1999, p. 7). Bringing the question of culture to bear on constructing alternative approaches to program planning requires an orientation to “the tightly structured processes of knowledge production” (Shore, 2004, p. 108). Rather than a process where the “non-white other is “assimilated into an imagined mainstream” (Shore, 2004 p. 110), an alternative approach to program planning that we are articulating is not about inclusion or efforts to develop cultural sensitivity (Razack, 1998) as these approaches ignore history and ongoing processes of marginalization through race, class, gender, and culture.

Jeanette Armstrong, First Nations writer, leader and activist writes in *Let us Begin with Courage* (n.d.) about her nation’s process called *En’owkin* which involves “willing team work within a whole-community system informed by deep collaboration across generations.” The relations among individual, family and community are interconnected. Individuals are unique, but also part of a “transgenerational organization called the family,” and community is a living process that interacts with the land. She outlines a non-adversarial approach to collaborative decision-making that has much to contribute to an alternative approach to program planning. In this approach a diversity of opinions is purposefully sought from four perspectives: the elders, the mothers, the fathers and the youth. The elders’ perspective is oriented to protecting tradition and connection to the land, the mothers’ perspective concerns the well-being of the family, the fathers’ perspective is oriented to security, sustenance and shelter, and the youth are oriented to change, the future, and creative solutions. It is not a rigid process; each person who contributes

must do so considering their strongest natural role and how they can best contribute to the community.

This process has much to teach democratic orientations to program planning as well as aesthetic and feminist sensibilities. En'owkin is a democratic process that is "a mediation process especially designed for community. It is a process that seeks to build solidarity and develop remediated outcomes that will be acceptable, by informed choice, to all who will be affected. Its collaborative decision-making engages everyone in the process; decisions are not handed down by leaders "empowered" to decide for everyone. It is a negotiated process that creates trust and consensus *because* the solution belongs to everyone for all their own reasons.

Concluding Poem:

Program planning theory tells of models, frames and steps
Informed by rationality, it does have much to suggest
It raises our awareness of the political landscape
It points to needs and objectives and how to evaluate
But humans are not robots, we have emotions and desires
We are culturally located, embodied and inspired
Our lives are too fragmented, we hurry and don't stop
To consider all our senses, to taste, and smell and touch
So in this conference paper, we've created a collage
Of ideas, fragments, and textures; a form of bricolage
So think of program planning as a piece of creative art
The pieces woven together, the whole now greater than the parts.

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