Critical Conversations: Basic Skills Students at the Table

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Abstract: *"I am 44 years old and enrolled in the ABE class at Bellingham Technical College. The ABE class is very important to me right now in my life, while I am drawing unemployment. I dropped out when I was 16 and got married and had my first baby. So there is a lot of stuff I have forgotten. And with the help of the ABE class, I feel like I can do the stuff I thought I couldn't. The ABE class made me have more confidence and self-esteem about myself, with the help of everyone in class."*

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It is hard to ignore the simple power of Elena's narrative. Stories like hers compel educators to open the doors of education wider for adult learners. Basic skills educators are accustomed to hearing such stories as the outcome of instruction. But what if student stories were part of the instructional content in ABE/GED courses? What happens when critical dialogue becomes an explicit component of the curriculum?

This notion of ongoing conversation has become an evolving theme in the Voices of Success Project at Bellingham Technical College (BTC) in northwest Washington. BTC faculty originally conceived of the project as an outreach program to attract adults who want additional education in basic academic skills. Later, a partnership was developed with Western Washington University (WWU) to study this population. Most recently, the authors of this paper worked together to implement a GED curriculum that fostered conversations between GED students and stakeholders (e.g., instructors, community representatives, graduate students) who are interested in basic skills instruction. This paper describes the classroom portion of this project and offers a theoretical rationale for the instructional methodology.

Toward Dialogic Discourse in Adult Education

Adult educators have long recognized the need to honor student expression. Freire regarded the assertion of student voice as a foundational component of critical pedagogy, which acts against "banking education" (1990). Presumably, banking education forces a dominant ideology on oppressed peoples, denying their views of the world and ultimately dehumanizing individuals. Critical pedagogy, on the other hand, encourages the oppressed to name the conditions of their oppression and, thus, assert their humanity. Educators in postmodern/ feminist/postcolonial traditions, likewise, champion approaches to adult education that make student voices audible. Campbell (1993) points out that, while feminists sometimes take issue with critical pedagogy, they generally agree with the Freirian objective of promoting marginalized discourses that challenge hegemonic power.

Such efforts challenge what Bakhtin (1981) called monologic discourse: communication that is unidirectional (like a monologue). Those who engage in monologic discourse disseminate knowledge without considering the perspectives of communicative partners. It is assumed that meaning is self-contained in the utterance or text. Banking education is monologic when educators unilaterally determine what constitutes legitimate knowledge and then attempt to

transmit this knowledge directly into the heads of students without considering the perspectives of the learners.

A better alternative is to promote education that is dialogic. Dialogism, in Bakhtin's lexicon, involves the negotiation of meaning through the interaction of multiple perspectives. Educators teach dialogically when they incorporate the beliefs and values of learners into the curriculum. Education becomes an organic dialogue in which participants learn from each other. There is no shortage of examples of dialogism in adult education. St Pierre (1998), for instance, describes efforts at Little Bighorn College in Montana to seek student input in refining the college mission. Administrators at this tribal college felt it was important for the institution to be more responsive to the concerns of constituents, particularly the Crow Nation. Groeschell (2001) describes a needs assessment conducted in the Social and Human Services Program at Seattle Central College. A survey was developed to solicit student feedback on support services, educational objectives, and other college resources. These examples are snapshots of what Temple and Ylitalo (2009) call "inclusive leadership" - that which encourages critical dialogue and promotes social justice.

Dialogic traditions underlie many of our basic beliefs about learning and democracy. Mezirow (1985) argues that learning should be approached as a dialogue between internal and external factors influencing understanding. Brookfield (2005) points out that adult education generally embraces the notion that critical reasoning and dialogue are foundational to a democratic society. In this respect, he argues, the field is indebted to the work of German philosopher Jurgen Habermas (1985), who sees a relationship between communication and emancipation. Rule (2004) further adds that, in promoting dialogic space, adult educators align themselves with a wide range of scholars from Plato to Burber. It is clear that the field of adult education is committed to hearing student voices. It is also apparent that this aim is not accomplished in one step. We do not achieve democracy or emancipation by listening to students one time. The project of creating dialogic space should be on-going.

There are numerous examples of educational programs that have taken long-term approaches to promoting dialogic exchange between instructors and students. Aarnio and Enqvist (2001) describe a vocational education program in Finland that uses a network-based model to create a community of practice. In this setting, students and faculty learn from each other as they co-construct knowledge. The authors explain that "network-based learning… form(s) a community where, hopefully, conversation is purposeful, relevant, and fruitful. Dialogue is a type of conversation to achieve these aims" (p. 2). Morrison (2009) describes her process of co-constructing an educational foundations course with her students. She approached this as an exercise in democratic education in the tradition of Freire, Dewey, Illich, and others. "(S)chools and classrooms," argues Morrison, "should be characterized by student choice, exploration of information for intrinsic goals, dialogue, discussion, self-governance (either on individual or group levels), and trust" (p. 103).

Conversations Within and Beyond the GED Classroom

Over the past three years, the Basic Academic Skills Program at Bellingham Technical College has developed the Voices of Success Project to attract and support students in ABE, GED, and ESL courses. Research conducted jointly by BTC and WWU found that adults who are eligible for basic skills instruction tend to listen to their peers (Goto, Martin, Goulet, Robinson, and Furtado, 2009). This work supported efforts by BTC to incorporate student

testimonials in promotional materials and to include student representatives in advisory board meetings. The original intention was to make student successes more visible to other adult learners, as well as to educational leaders.

The student population in the BTC program is not unlike ABE/GED populations elsewhere. Most of the students have dropped out of high school before graduation and have come to BTC with the goal of preparing for the GED test. Many received special education services in public schools due to learning disabilities or other learning challenges. Some graduated from high school but seek ABE/GED support in order to brush up on basic academic skills before taking college-level entrance/ placement tests. Most come to class with low academic skills and even lower self-confidence and self-esteem.

As one of the organizers of the Voices of Success Project, Marcia Leister wanted to incorporate the notion of critical dialogue into her GED curriculum. She hoped that engaging students in stimulating discussions with educators and others would strengthen their motivation to persist in school. Her intention was to promote meta-cognitive awareness as students explore career and education pathways. Students would learn through writing, reading, speaking, conducting research, and transacting with people within and outside of the class. The goal was for the students to reflect critically on the role of education in their lives.

An Example of Dialogic Exchange

One of the unique features of this GED curriculum was a collaborative exchange with a graduate course in adult literacy taught by Stanford Goto. Most of the students in this graduate course were either prospective educators who were interested in literacy or student affairs professionals who work with diverse student populations. Students in the GED and graduate classes simultaneously read *A Place to Stand* by Jimmy Santiago Baca (2001). (In his memoire, Baca recalls growing up not knowing how to read. It was after he went to prison as an adult that he realized the potential of literacy to transform his life.) The common reading was intended to be a catalyst for conversation that might lead the groups to learn about each other.

The exchange started with the graduate students generating questions for the GED class. Some surmised that Baca and the GED students might have similar backgrounds. Baca specifically mentions not having reading materials in his home environment. These are some questions generated by the graduate students:

- What sort of reading do you do?
- Do you ever read for fun, or have a favorite book or magazine?
- What purpose do books serve in your life?
- Did you have a specific dream or vision for yourself before deciding to take those first steps into a classroom?

The instructors created a handout with these and other questions, which were distributed to two GED classes. These were some responses from the GED students:

> "I read every word when I read a book, especially when I'm interested in it. I like biography books about the different struggles that people went through in the past."

> "I read romance novels, fantasy novels. I am currently reading some Sherrilyn Kenyon dark hunter novels. And of course reading/studying contemporary GED books to get my GED. I always read. I would rather read than watch TV. I just finished Acheron By Sherrilyn Kenyon for the third time and just started reading it for the fourth time."
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> "Yes, sometimes I read for fun, my favorite books or magazines are cookbooks, cooking magazines, and things of that nature."
>
> "I use books mostly for information that will benefit me or others."
>
> "I've always planned on going to college and had big dreams, so I just figured it would just happen. I have to put my foot in the door first."

In class, the GED students talked about their responses and speculated about why the graduate students asked particular questions. Some felt that the questions were out of touch with the realities of poor and working-class students. They speculated that the graduate students must be so sheltered in the academic ivory tower that they have no concept of the outside world. Consequently, the GED classes generated these questions for the graduate students:

- How was your life when you were growing up and what was your relationship with text?
- Did you ever drop out of high school and still go on to college?
- Did your life responsibilities ever affect your going to school?
- How many of you (CCE students) are putting yourselves through school?
- What kind of support do you have from your family in going to college?
- Do you consider yourself privileged?
- Do you buy your own stuff (e.g. your car)?
- How were you successful in school without struggling with anything?
- What sort of adversity have you faced in going to school?
- Have you ever been in trouble with the law? If yes, did it affect your chances of getting into college?
- Even though you're really smart, do you feel scared in going to college? Do you ever doubt that you can pass tests?
- How do you get to school? (e.g., Do you take the bus?)

These questions were eye-opening for the graduate class. The students realized that, while they were analyzing the GED students, the GED students were analyzing them. It was apparent that there were misconceptions in both camps. The graduate students decided to respond in depth to these questions. Some created video recordings of themselves. Others wrote extended essays. They spoke frankly about their privilege, their anxieties about going to college, their hopes for the future. Some described dropping out of high school or getting in trouble with the law. After replying, two graduate students reflected:

> I think the biggest takeaway I have gotten from the experience has been that, though our literacy levels vary greatly from one another, there are more commonalities between us than I could have imagined at first. Some of the basic similarities between these ABE students and myself include: the desire to be seen as competent regardless of our audience, a drive to enhance one's situation through education, vast knowledge about all sorts of

topics, and a willingness to feel vulnerable if it helps achieve the end goal of learning more.

One thing that keeps coming to my mind is the power and limitations of motivation in the individual students. It is interesting to read about the moment Marcia's students decided they needed to go back and get their GED after many years of not being engaged in any kind of formal education whatsoever. It is powerful to read about that breaking point. However, hearing how much work is needed to meet the standards of the GED and then add on the idea of moving into other, more demanding educational programs with increasingly higher standards and goals is intense. How resilient does motivation make a student? What else is needed for students to be successful for the long haul?

The Transformative Potential of Dialogue

A seismic shift occurs when educators stop talking at students and they begin talking with students. Everyone is put in a potentially vulnerable place; everyone becomes a learner. When knowledge is truly co-constructed, the ultimate outcome cannot be predicted with certainty. This can be disconcerting, but it can also be liberating.

With the collaborative project between the GED and graduate classes, we set out to design a curriculum that would increase motivation and persistence among students while fostering critical literacy skills. It became so much more than this. We believe there was transformative growth among us all: the GED students, the graduate students, and the instructors. Freire challenged educators to pursue humanizing education. Our experience with the collaborative project illustrates the profound potential that dialogue has to help students and educators to recognize each other's humanity. Moreover, through authentic dialogue, each party might discover something about their own humanity.

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