

Envisioning an Ecojustice Adult Education

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Abstract: This paper outlines an ecojustice adult education and distinguishes it from adult environmental education. The ecological crisis is described and a call is made for adult educators to take the initiative to teach and learn about the ecological crisis. Adult education is perfectly poised to confront these issues yet little effort has been made in the field. Adult educators might envision ecojustice education within a larger social justice effort.

The ecological crisis now facing the world's people warrants our immediate attention as adult educators. Ecological systems across the globe are undergoing rapid changes, with the greatest impact being experienced by those least able to afford the amplified costs associated with these changes. The costs of heating and the supply of adequate water will proliferate as natural systems shift between extreme cold weather and droughts. At the same time, the markets continue to promote an industrial/ consumer dependent culture. Efforts to further expand the economy and thus dependence upon consumerism not only impacts individuals by reducing their ability to save for retirement (which is already made difficult by the low wages), but also contributes to the degradation of natural systems that is affecting fisheries, natural habitats, and changes in the chemistry of the world's oceans that threaten the very basis of the food chain. These changes in natural systems, in turn, promote the likelihood of more extreme weather patterns in the future. (Brown, 2008).

With the world population moving toward nine billion people, a combination of forces — the adoption of Western consumer lifestyle such as that which is occurring in China and India and greater dependence upon the industrial system of production are increasing tensions among people amid rapidly depleting resources. With the majority of the world's population facing economic uncertainties and little prospects of escaping poverty, corporations continue to enjoy a seemingly unchecked power and authority over the world of work and consumption (Ford 2009; Klein, 2007; Reich 2011). Indeed, the power of international corporations in this country and elsewhere continues to undermine the exercise of local democracy both here in the United States and in the poorest countries. The exploitation of natural resources and the expansion of dependence upon a money economy at the same time as western technologies are reducing the need for workers is an omnipresent but little recognized double bind (Klein, 2007; Shiva, 2010). Less noticed by Western promoters of economic globalization is how Western techno-scientific practices are eroding the intergenerational knowledge as well as the linguistic and cultural diversity among the world's people. Traditional non-consumer dependent patterns of mutual support and skills are disappearing as more of the world's population seek to become modern and free of their culture's constraints to achieve unlimited material well-being. The irony is that unlimited material progress and wealth is increasingly unattainable in the United States as the gulf between the wealthy top percent of the population increasingly diverges from the growth in poverty for the majority (Stewart, 2013; Puzanghera, 2014). The scale of these changes now represent special challenges for the field of adult education.

These ecological, cultural and economic issues are not just some features on some public agenda. For all practical purposes, these issues are the agenda. No other issues of politics, economics, and public policy will remain unaffected by the crisis of resources, population, climate change, species extinction, acid rain, deforestation, ozone depletion and soil loss (Orr, 1992). Ecological deterioration will soon mask other conflicts worldwide as the struggle for land and diminishing resources increases.

Absences in the Field of Adult Education

While the field of adult education has been forthcoming about new trends in education, including a broadening of perspectives of race, gender, socioeconomic class, but it has been largely silent about the ecological crisis, the crisis of work and cultural life in an age of global warming and its relationship to inequities and the marginalization of the poor and marginalized. The roots causes of the ecological crisis and sustainability for the world's people are not widely discussed in adult education. Today, as ecological issues increase and concern worldwide is mounting; the field of adult education remains under-theorized in these areas.

Yet, no other field of education is more perfectly poised to confront these issues. Adult learning is more central to the societal reproduction, resistance and transformation than the education of youth and children. Resistance to and the transformation of societal structures emerge more vibrantly from the adult population. When men and women see the world in new ways, they engage with purpose and determination (Welton, 1995).

As adult educators we must not wait until the current generation of young people and children begin to apply their learning about ecology, cultural life, work, and sustainability. It must begin now with today's adults who are making vital decisions about the quality and scope of ecological life now (Clover, 1999; Clover, Follen & Hall, 2000). Adults are also the primary voters, consumers, workers, employers, parents, etc. and are a powerful force in any given society. If their ideas, knowledge, power and imaginations can be employed to address ecological issues, the results might be remarkable.

In this theoretical paper, I address the components of an ecojustice adult education and offer ways that such work can be incorporated into adult education.

The Limitations of Adult Environmental Education

Adult environmental education is limited in its scope and effectiveness. In general, adult environmental education has been concerned with basic information about ecology, natural systems, an appreciation of the outdoors, awareness of ecological issues and other knowledge relegated earth science. While this is important knowledge, there are several concerns with this approach. First, ecology is defined predominately as the scientific study and management of the natural systems. The problem of the environment is left to the natural sciences and thus removed from the reality and responsibility of ordinary citizens. Natural systems are assumed to be outside of the realm of human communities. Efforts that encourage us to understand the interdependent nature of ecosystems and the notion that all components are impacted by other changes in the system is an important concept in environmental education, however, its also vitally important to examine the cultural roots of ecological issues. While young people and adults are initiated into concepts related to ecology and the environment, they are not led to examine the roots causes of ecological crisis, including the social, political and economic causes of these crises (Bowers, 2001; Martusewicz, Edmundson, & Lupinacci, 2011).

Defining Ecojustice Adult Education

Ecojustice adult education moves beyond adult environmental education. It is the study of the ways that humans dominate nature and about the ways that these prevailing relations are impacting the earth. It is concerned with the limitations of science and its too narrow focus that does not acknowledge the indigenous language, memory, imagination, values and creativity of the world's people. Ecojustice adult education opposes the dominance of one group over another, of humans over non-humans, or humans over nature. This framework also challenges current conceptions of social justice education which fail to consider the ways that social justice efforts are too often framed in terms of middle-class values and lifestyle patterns that do not take into account the environmental limits and accompanying Western practices that foster hyper-consumerism and materialism forms of wealth (Bowers, 2011; Martusewicz, Edmundson, & Lupinacci 2011).

An ecojustice adult education examines the deep cultural assumptions underlying modernist thinking, particularly that thinking which undermines local and global systems that are essential to life. It seeks to examine the patterns of domination that unjustly define some people as less worthy than others and aspects of the natural world as inferior and less worthy of life. It seeks an analysis of hyper-consumption and commodification including the exploitation of resources in contexts that favor corporations and marginalize the poor. An ecojustice adult education also favors democracies, particularly at the local level in which decisions are made by the people most affected by those actions. Community-based decision-making and local democracy are desired (Bowers, 2001; Martusewicz, et.al., 2001).

Ecojustice adult education is vitally interested in relations of power and seeks to forge renewed relationships and new ways of seeing the potential for healthier relationships with the earth. It is concerned with both the natural and cultural commons. The natural commons are comprised of the natural resources - air, water, land, vegetation - available for our use as inhabitants of the earth. The cultural commons, on the other hand, are comprised of the long - term sustaining activities, tangible and abstract, that have been known for centuries. These are the life-sustaining spaces and practices, and the intergenerational knowledge and non-monetized exchanges that have forged our social and cultural lives. The cultural commons are the practices that leave a much smaller ecological footprint, and tend to be more in harmony with the natural world than concerned with control of it. These 'cultural commons' are very much alive today in all urban, rural and suburban communities, and include the creative arts, craft knowledge, knowledge of food production & its cultivation, forms of bartering and non-monetized systems of exchange, cultural dance & expression, oral history & storied narratives, healing and medicinal practices, and various ceremonies & games and heritage languages. In short, it is the developed patterns of mutual support and exchange that sustained communities for thousands of years. Most often, this knowledge includes responsible knowledge of the use of resources from the natural environment as well as forms of cultural customs and practices (Bowers 2006, 2011, 2012).

The need for adult educators to engage in an understanding of, as well as participation in, an education for adults that highlights the local natural and cultural commons, is foundational to this theoretical work. I maintain that educators must take responsibility for understanding the importance of conserving the life-renewing capacity of the natural and cultural systems.

Ecojustice adult education, then, is more than the greening of our way of thinking. It is about cultivating the indigenous, cultural commons practices that sustain us. Overcoming the human over nature oppression that characterizes our modern world and mindset. It is about

reconnecting with sensory, spiritual and emotional ways of knowing and critically examining the root causes of the environmental crisis including unequal power relations, unchecked corporate power, imperialism, 'progress', etc. Making links between environmental knowledge and the cultural commons, and linking global and local issues are paramount. Using the community as a site of learning, learning through daily experiences in our own contexts becomes vitally important. In addition, it's also prudent to examine lifestyles to ascertain what should be retained and what should be discarded to promote sustainability and a more enriched cultural life. All of this is promoted through the development of concrete actions in which people become empowered to see themselves as competent agents of change (Clover, 1999).

Ecojustice adult education examines the ecological crisis and makes the link between environmental issues and other political, social, economic and cultural issues. But, importantly, it should encourage people to re-connect with the natural and cultural commons, through engagement in their communities. Like all sound practices in adult education, it should always begin from people's experiences, knowledge and expertise. In this case, knowledge of the natural and cultural commons and knowledge about ecological and sustainability efforts should be paramount. It should work from the premise that people have within themselves the potential to address these significant issues. Finally all of this should take place in the community where adult education and action are most fertile (Clover, 1999; Clover, 2004).

In formal classes of adult learning and development and in informal sites, through leadership, or through a view of contemporary issues in the field, adults can be introduced to the cultural commons through course work aimed at engaging them with the community. In informal settings such as in farmers' markets, community gardens, yoga studios, neighborhood centers, art enclaves, and other community centered programs, adults and young people can learn to theorize about the cultural commons in relationship to the activities that they enjoy.

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