Cracking the code:
Problems and possibilities of curriculum analysis in adult education

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Abstract:In this paper I argue for the importance of explicit curriculum analysis as a critical approach to adult education research, and highlight several intriguing and challenging aspects of the endeavour. The discussion is illustrated with examples from my own work on the structures of knowledge in our vocation.

As an educator who believes in the important contributions adult education and learning can make to changing oppressive social structures, a central interest of my work is developing insights into the workings of knowledge. The formation, delivery, and evaluation of knowledge remains a central problem in all educational fields, from emergent reading to graduate study, and I believe it to be a particularly pressing issue in adult education. The last few years have not been a friendly time for educators interested in social change, with reductions in state funding and accountability systems couched in instrumental terms coming together to limit what is regarded as legitimate adult education provision. By understanding more about the derivation and implications of the knowledge transmitted and created in educational processes we can create the theoretical and practical tools necessary to support agendas of social change in a conservative context.

The Meaning of Curriculum

Adult educators rarely use the term curriculum, tending to be more comfortable with the idea of program planning (Selman & Dampier, 1991), though the two terms are not synonyms. Program planning has more of a pragmatic flavour, whereas curriculum is ". . . that reconstruction of knowledge and experience, systematically developed under the auspices of the school (or the university), to enable the learner to increase his or her control of knowledge and experience" (Tanner & Tanner, 1980, p.38). In this discussion, I view knowledge as "any and every set of ideas and acts accepted by one or another social group or society of people--- ideas and acts pertaining to what they accept as real for themselves and for others" (McCarthy, 1996, p.23). Perspectives on knowledge and reality are closely linked in a relationship of power, and one of the problems of the program planning approach is the loss of opportunity to consider the implications of this relationship.

Despite avoidance of the term, adult educators create a curriculum whenever they explicitly or implicitly select some objects of knowledge over others, or choose a particular way to handle knowledge in their pedagogy. These decisions are not neutral, and neither are they the result of natural processes. As Williams reminds us,

> . . . what has been thought of as simple distribution is in fact an active shaping to particular social ends. It is also that the content of education, which is subject to great historical variation, again expresses, again both consciously and unconsciously, certain basic elements in the culture, what is thought of as "an education" being in fact a particular selection, a particular set of emphases and omissions. (1961, p.125)

The curriculum, in other words, always reflects certain interests. When these interests are not examined, I believe educators run the risk of leaving unaddressed the role of knowledge as a phenomenon of power. If the structures surrounding education are not challenged the default position is unconscious and unproblematic reproduction of inequitable social structures. However, curricular practices can be a powerful source of potential change if the patterns can be made visible and problematic. If adult educators have a role to play in supporting citizens to challenge dominant forms of thought we must begin by understanding how we think ourselves.

Enquiry into curriculum in schooling has been a fruitful and significant area of study within the sociology of education for several decades. In the early 1970s Young argued that the sociology of education should be considered essentially as the sociology of knowledge (1971), and over the following ten years the influence of sociologically informed curriculum theorists increased greatly. It is hard to appreciate how radical the ideas of Bernstein (1977), Karabel and Halsey (1977), Young, and many other writers were at the time. Their central argument, that knowledge was not an incorruptible set of eternal truths but a relative construct, was an enormous challenge to the historically instrumental view of education. By the 1980s and 1990s curriculum theory was being influenced by critical pedagogues such as Apple (1985), Giroux (1992), hooks (1994), Gaskell (1991) and McLaren (1996), who were interested in issues such as race, gender, ethnicity, and language. One element in common to all of these writers was the commitment to bring theoretical and concrete analyses together, as they illustrated their abstract arguments with empirical examples and classroom practices.

Adult education theorists engaged with these issues to a far more limited extent, but some of their work is extremely valuable. Freire (1972) is an example at the theoretical end of the spectrum, producing a great deal of influential writing applicable to all branches of education. More concrete, and specifically adult education oriented analyses, include Keddie's (1980) comparison of adult education philosophy to that of elementary school. Another example is Shapin and Barnes' (1976) analysis of the moral structure of the British Mechanics' Institutes, complete with a catechism which started from the digestive system and led to God's attitude to stealing. Thompson's (1980) work on adult education and patriarchy must also be mentioned as a good example of the insights arising from considering knowledge and its provenance. More recently, Cervero and Wilson's (1994) work has started to address the knowledge/power structures of curriculum in adult education, but the conversation seems to be flagging once more. It appears difficult to sustain research bringing together both empirical and theoretical elements.

This type of enquiry does offer benefits. Many of the early studies in schooling have become classics relevant to contemporary educational practice, and colleges of education have adopted many principles developed from curriculum theorisation into their work. One example is the broad and inclusive definition of literacy used in reading programs, challenging historical

notions of literacy as the ability to read school oriented texts, another is the importance of multicultural education as a cornerstone of teacher preparation. For adult education in particular, I see curricular enquiry as having a unique set of potential benefits and drawbacks.

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Close examination of the curriculum expressed in adult education programs can help the work of educators in many ways. One of the most critical advantages is raised awareness of curriculum as a process rather than a product. Knowledge selection and representation is an active, contingent process embedded in particular interests, and through their actions educators can choose to support or undermine those interests. Agency does matter, and the decisions made in the pedagogical process have important implications when valuable knowledge is seen not as a given, but as a contestable phenomenon. An example from my own work, from a union based literacy program, was an educator who chose to teach math by using real life examples from the economics of work. He asked students to calculate how long it would take to buy a Ferrari while working at MacDonald's (St.Clair, 2000). By doing this, he was introducing new knowledge about the way work is compensated into what could be seen as a traditional, reproductive numeracy component.

Curriculum theory also has potential to underpin deep theorisation, allowing practices to be understood within a network of commonalities and disjunctures shared within the field. At present, research is often focussed on isolated incidents captured through ethnographic representation and grounded theory, or is conducted on a purely philosophical level. Curriculum theory allows practices and values to be brought together meaningfully. A useful example is Freire's (1972) notion of banking and transformative education, which are based in deep theory, but have widespread applicability and produce many useful and practical insights.

By working at the boundary of the knowledge education values, critical curriculum theory challenges the structures of legitimacy shaping practices. It encourages liminality, a focus on the edges of what is known and not known. By examining the representation of women or people of colour in the educational setting it is possible to see what is left out or considered not worth knowing, and begin to address the gaps. It pulls the gaze of the educator away from the core of common knowledge to the uncommon knowledge of the margins. For example, why do employment preparation programs focus so strongly on employment, but not deal with the knowledge participants accrue through unemployment?

Critical curricular theory critiques notions of boundedness and challenges the idea that education is a closed system. It requires educators to acknowledge social context, viewing adult education as a manifestation of wider concerns rather than a wholly autonomous setting. This also extends to adult education's place in the wider educational system. While there are critical differences between initial and adult education, curriculum analysis often demonstrates how similar the pressures and limits of the work can be. While school educators may have explicit curriculum guidelines from the state or school board reducing their opportunities for critical education, adult educators can be constrained by more subtle pressures. One example is the proposal adult education projects often have to submit in order to obtain their annual funding, many of which require detailed, hour by hour breakdown of classroom activities and their evaluation.

Curricular investigation is hardly a straightforward area of work, however, and there are a number of challenges to be overcome. One of the trickiest is the range of empirical difficulties associated with examining knowledge. Curriculum analysis is typically a mesolevel endeavour mediating between social theory and close observation of practices. It can be difficult to create and sustain a coherent and credible bridge between the empirical and sociopolitical aspects of analysis without picking on easy targets or collapsing into banal observations. Critiques of knowledge can lose their power if they become too familiar to readers of the research, or if they rely too heavily on either theory or data. The aim is to create a situation for the two aspects of the work to enter into reciprocal relationship.

The huge diversity of adult education as a field of practice, and of adult learning as an activity woven into all human lives, creates interesting problems for curriculum analysis. Critical work on the K-12 system is made easier by the relatively monolithic nature of schooling in North America, and its similarity to other initial schooling provision around the world. Michael Apple's (1993) analyses of textbooks and the management of knowledge in schooling, for example, can be related to by educators all over the world, and he does not have to describe the context of his work at great length. The shared knowledge of what school systems look like is not available to researchers in adult education, making explicit contextual description necessary. When examining adult learning in less formal settings there is also the challenge of defining exactly what constitutes both the content and transmittal mechanism of the curriculum.

The relative lack of indigenous theory in adult education may also be a challenge for analysts. Schooling has a strong history of investigation into its philosophical, historical, and sociological base, whereas adult education in North America has been less interested in developing theory based on these factors. Some work from the UK, such as Jane Thompson's (1980) writing, does engage with deep theoretical issues, but most adult education literature with a philosophical bent is descriptive, or applies ideas drawn from other fields. It would be difficult to develop a really strong theory of curriculum for adults in such a theoretical vacuum, and it may be worthwhile really thinking through what adult educators see as the primary motivation for their work. Is it about the provision of instrumetal knowledge in the most efficient way possible, or is there an essential philosophical and epistemic commitment to making education for adults different and challenging? A related point is the need to work out the relationship of critical curriculum enquiry to program planning. Recent work in planning has started to raise questions about issues of power and its manifestations in educational settings, a refreshing change from the instrumental emphasis dominating the field for so long. Analysts could attempt to start a new interest, or they could follow the critical turn in program planning.

Curriculum analysis offers few easy answers for the educator wanting to change their practices, since it tends to make limits visible rather than disrupt them. A further step is required, where the findings and insights of curricular analysis are developed into concrete implications, or it is possible for critical curriculum analysis to be seen as just another abstract and academic area of work. The challenge is going beyond the point where researchers usually stop, and framing recommendations in language educators can apply to their everyday experience. An example from my own work (St.Clair, 2000) is the suggestion that an employment preparation program should change from having three months of literacy followed by three of vocational skills to six months of both running parallel. This change, I believed, would help to make literacy appear

more valuable and also foster critical reflection on the vocational component. It can be daunting for researchers to make this type of suggestion, but the time has passed for critical analysis to remain on the sidelines. Concretisation is one of the most important tests of curricular insights.

What Might It Look Like?

I will close with some comments on the form critical curriculum analysis might take in adult education in order to maximise the benefits and address the challenges. From my comments above, it should be clear that I view the situated nature of the work as an extremely important factor. A balance of theory and data must be created, pushing towards both rigorous analysis and concrete implications. To concentrate on one without the other is to miss the opportunity to address the widest possible audience in a way they can grasp and appreciate in terms of its meaning for their own work.

I also suggest adult education curriculum analysis needs to be fully contextualised, due to the variety of settings in which it is practiced. Bernstein's (1977) work can be helpful here, as he points out the importance of organisation factors and other features not commonly associated with the production of knowedge. The broadest approach possible must be taken to ensure the curriculum is recognised as a product of, and influence upon, the entire social setting, and this also has implications for the validity of the work. Bassey (1981) suggests one of the most relevant forms of validity in education research is relatability, the extent to which readers can pick up the research report and understand the commonalities between the research site and their own situation. This quality is especially important in adult education.

Curriculum theory in adult education certainly reflects the work done in initial education, but should also not lose sight of the ways in which our field is different. The history of adult education as a social movement and as a catalyst for change cannot be forgotten. Griffin ends his book on curriculum in adult education by calling for a body of theory which sets out

> . . . to explore the ways in which its aims, content and methods transform or reproduce the knowledge categories of schooling. For unless it demonstrably transforms them, the claims of adult and lifelong education to achieve social policy objectives will remain difficult to make out. (1983, p. 206)

One of the best ways to honour the potential of groups of adult learners to create new forms of knowledge in new contexts is to understand that process more fully. When more is known about the limits and the possibilities of knowledge creation in the specific social contexts of adult learning, we can begin to discover how necessary instrumental ends and the even more important aspiration to open up critical participation in society can co-exist in programs. We can begin to unravel how people learn to act as consumers, political activists, and social critics, and work out how to support that. The full implications of reproductive adult education, both positive and negative, can be fully documented and transformed. I believe we have an opportunity to engage with the core of adult education and its poetry of possibility, but first we have to crack the curricular code in which it is written.

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