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Using Radical Adult Education to Map Change in a Globalized World

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Using Radical Adult Education to Map Change in a Globalized World

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Abstract: Radical adult education supports change agents within their sphere of influence. Cultural mapping can stake claims, identify benchmarks, grow networks, or develop participatory action research within the identified community.

Keywords: radical adult education, cultural mapping, transformative learning

“Adult education leaders of the future have a role to play in addressing global issues” (Merriam, Courtenay, & Cervero, 2006, p. xiv). Radical adult education takes on sociologically inspired outcomes when applied to transformative learning theory (Schugurensky, 2001). When framing the role of adult educator as social change agent within a classroom context, students can become overwhelmed by the issues and fall into a depressed state or they can find their voice and power to take on an active role within their own community context. During a recent doctoral seminar in lifelong learning, we saw an opportunity to develop our leadership as change agents in a globalized, neo-liberal world. The class used the radical adult education tradition to “unveil the social, economic, and political dynamics of oppressions that are embedded in everyday situations and practices and of becoming aware of the socially constructed nature of our beliefs, values, ideas, and tastes” (Schugurensky, 2001, p. 60). We constructed six integrated dialogues building on large themes, such as globalization, capitalism, and impacts of the market economy; marginalized populations; health and the environment; community empowerment; educational systems and other topics connected to transformative learning. Learners saw opportunities to make a difference within their own professional contexts and began to develop action plans that could be implemented in the future through either academic research or professional practice.

As Schugurensky (2001) suggests, the radical approach to our critical reflection and transformations was “fundamentally emancipatory since it involves social critique, addresses oppressive social structures and results in transformation of a comprehensive worldview and eventually in social change” (p. 61). Through our roles as adult educators in our own communities we choose to think positively and take this critique of the world into our hands as applicable methods, techniques, critical thinking, conversations, and benchmarks. Through our work, we encourage others to get involved in positive social changes. Budd Hall (2001) provides the call to action:

It is time to claim back the power of the Utopian vision. In claiming back of the power of a vision of the world we want, as opposed to the world we do not want, adult learning has an important role to play. (p. 44)

Each adult educator works within a sphere of influence, professionally, personally, and within an academic setting. “The adult learning and training world is rich with networks, websites, newsletters, conferences, and other structures of communication that already exist to support the search for New Utopian visions” (Hall, 2001, p. 44). We can use cultural mapping to better define this sphere and identify points of entry for change or community action. Cultural mapping can be used as an “action journey undertaken to identify, investigate or reclaim

strengths” (Joi Field, 2010, Para 1), in order to stake claims, set benchmarks, grow networks, or develop participatory action research within the identified community.

Sarah Ban Breathnach stated, “The world needs dreamers and the world needs doers. But above all the world needs dreamers who do” (Harper, 2016, p. 30). This quote encompasses what we did in the course: *we dreamed; we performed; we inquired; we allowed creativity; spirituality and expression to guide our educational journey; and through it all, as we reached across the globe.* Upon conclusion of the course, each student wrote a reflection on their learning emphasizing the key themes: *utopia, transformation, and empowerment.* We focused on redefining a new utopia, and how transformative learning can serve as a change agent, particularly in areas of social justice and equality.

Students are encouraged and expected to actually apply the information they learn in their courses. *Do not just tell us what we told you. “What’s the so what?” Take that information to the next level and actually apply it.* Goals to reach these themes include: *Goal #1: Be informed; Goal #2: Be Involved and Engaged; Goal #3: Be Refreshed.*

We also used art to spark creativity and reach a common language across different groups of people. Cultural mapping provided a framework to redefine utopia and use transformative learning as social change agents with a view to work toward critical practice for social justice and equality. *In short, cultural mapping can help us link concepts to our lived experiences and make meaning of them as well as develop a plan of action around the experiences.*

Levels of hierarchy, global power structures, and their impact on societies were a central focus of the class. By using cultural mapping, one can begin to see the many layers and interconnectedness among cultural characteristic, such as languages, beliefs, and technologies and their interface/existence within power structures. We quickly realized that while issues sometimes seemed far removed, the interconnectedness really was undeniable. As a result, we act critically to challenge the status quo by asking: “why and for whom?” Failure to collectively change systems, will maintain the status quo and the balance of power will not shift.

I’ve learned through this class that creativity and humor are also important approaches to transformative learning and leading and that I truly can be a catalyst for peace and respect. With honesty and respect for others, I hope to make a difference at work and in other settings one person, one project, one meeting, and one conversation at a time.

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