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Community Organizing in/as Adult Education

Thomas Archibald
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Abstract: Community organizing and adult education overlap in a number of ways, yet other than some notable exceptions, those overlaps remain inadequately explicated and insufficiently represented in contemporary adult education literature. The purpose of this paper is to explore the conceptual and practical overlaps of adult education and community organizing, in an effort to elevate an adult education praxis that promotes participation, equity, and justice.

Keywords: Community organizing, social justice, popular education, social movements

Introduction and Purpose Statement

On one hand, community organizing is inextricably linked with adult education and has been for a long time. Community organizing is a central and usually explicit feature of influential radical adult education traditions such as Hull House (Addams, 1902/2002; 1910/1998), Freirean pedagogy (Freire, 1970; Steiner, Krank, Bahruth, & McLaren, 2004), the Highlander Folk School (Horton, 1989; Glen, 1996), and the Antigonish Movement (Coady, 1980; Lotz, 1977). As Brookfield wrote in the Preface to Michael Newman's *Teaching Defiance*, Newman's book

reinserts adult education where it started and where it belongs—in the tradition of a strong truly democratic movement that uses education to help the citizenry stay critically alert to the ever-present dangers or demagoguery, brainwashing, secrecy at the highest levels and ideological manipulation. In North America this is the tradition of Myles Horton, Eduard Lindeman and Moses Coady that is so often espoused but rarely acted on. (Brookfield, 2006, p. viii)

While Brookfield doesn't explicitly mention organizing in that quotation, he evokes it, as does Newman in his mission statement for activist adult educators: "to help people become truly conscious, understand the different worlds we live in, ... to teach people how to make up their own minds, and how to take control of their moment" (Newman, 2006, p. 10).

Yet, on the other hand, much contemporary adult education discourse seems disconnected from these traditions. This is the second of two paths along which adult education has evolved: "One [path] has facilitated democratic reflection and action through a critical

identification of issues; the other has served to domesticate learners, ignore contradictions, and adjust minds to the inevitable conformities of mass society” (Heaney, 1993, pp. 19-20). This second path of adult education is characterized by what Newman calls a “domesticated kind of critical thinking,” where the concept is “reduced to a corporatist competency” (2006, p. 10). Many adult education programs, centers, and other initiatives (whether bearing the name ‘lifelong learning,’ ‘workplace learning,’ ‘continuing education,’ or some related title) have become, in essence, diametrically opposed to the types of social change that community organizing tends to promote. With their focus on marketization and corporate economic efficiencies, these forms of adult and lifelong learning are, in the Foucauldian sense, neoliberal technologies of control, an example of governmentality (Olssen, 2006; see also Bryant, Johnston, & Usher, 2004).

Even in scholarly venues where the critical and emancipatory roots of adult education remain part of the conversation, the literature is nearly devoid of sustained considerations of how adult education and community organizing are mutually imbricated and implicated. For instance, a search of *Adult Education Quarterly* for the term “community organizing” in the full text returns only eight results, while the same search of the *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education* returns just one (although admittedly the topic is undoubtedly discussed in other ways, even if that specific term is not used; for the sake of the argument in this brief paper, a simple search was performed). Most of these few mentions of community organizing are only fleeting. Community organizing has been discussed in previous iterations of the Adult Education Research Conference (e.g., Dalton, Ahmed, & Sawan, 2011; Edelson, Ahmed, & Gerwin, 2014), but more often as illustrations rather than as the object of sustained conceptual inquiry.

To help address this apparent gap, the purpose of this paper is to explore the conceptual and practical overlaps of adult education and community organizing. The paper is predicated on the assumption that such overlaps exist and that, other than some notable exceptions, they remain inadequately explicated and insufficiently represented in contemporary adult education literature. I posit that a more thorough and nuanced understanding of community organizing’s implications for adult education—framed with a novel (however tentative) typology of the overlap—can help practitioners and theorists alike enhance their adult education work and increase the likelihood that their work reflects the often elusive values of participation, equity, and justice.

Literature on Community Organizing in/as Adult Education

Before continuing, it is important to note that while I do not impose a strict or rigid definition of community organizing in this analysis, I understand that term to generally refer to any effort characterized by “people in civil society acting intentionally in concert with others to change their lives, powered and guided by their own interests and values” (Cowan, 2018, p. xii). In the words of influential community organizer Edward Chambers, “Organizers are agitators, catalysts, and public life coaches. They stand for the whole. They make things happen. ... They are public people who seek collective power to act for justice” (Chambers, 2018, p. 106). Identifying, analyzing, and working with power, challenging the status quo, and leading collective action for social justice are all key tenets of community organizing. As I suggest below, numerous adult education traditions do all of these things, too.

Discussion of the ways in which community organizing intersects with adult education can be found in the literature on the various traditions—some of which are mentioned above—that form the constellation of community-based, popular, critical, activist-inflected adult educations for community development, community action, cultural action, and/or social action (see, for example, Cunningham, 1988; Foley, 1999; Holst, 2002; Lovett, 1974, 1988). We can find examples in contexts and approaches such as: the Cooperative Extension Service (through both an historic and a contemporary lens); the freedom struggle, also known as the civil rights movement (Payne, 2007); action research and its variants (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2006); engaged scholarship and pedagogy (Peters, Jordan, Alter, & Bridger, 2003); and deliberative pedagogy (Shaffer, Longo, Manosevitch, & Thomas, 2017), although the conceptual and practical overlaps of community organizing and adult education are apparent and explicit in those literatures to varying degrees.

For instance, though most contemporary commentators on the Cooperative Extension system—including (or especially) many practitioners within the system—would not associate it with community organizing, the overlap is there. While Cooperative Extension is often seen as a technical agency designed to disseminate scientific knowledge emanating from research university to farmers and other members of the general public, the land-grant ideal and Cooperative Extension mission have also always contained this narrative (Peters, 2002a, 2002b, 2007). Others of these manifestations in the literature are more explicit, falling more on the community organizing side of the spectrum but linking back to the importance of adult education. For example, Payne’s (2007) *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*, nicely demonstrates how adult education played a key role in the civil rights movement, especially in the context of voter registration actions linked to

literacy campaigns, (like the Citizenship Schools of Highlander) even if many of the heroes of those stories didn't necessarily self-identify as adult educators.

In similar fashion, Holst (2002) looks beyond the field of adult education to learn from wider debates over social movements (both new and old), identifying a number of organizing traditions which clearly overlap with adult education, even while those overlaps remain (until his analysis) relatively tacit. Examples include sociologists Eyerman and Jamison (1991) “— who, like many practitioners of adult education—provide a theoretical framework to analyze the relationship between adult education and social movements [and be extension community organizing] (Holst, 2002, p. 81). They combine Marxist analysis and Habermas' emphasis on communicative interaction in an approach they call 'cognitive praxis.' Another approach from outside the confines of the field of adult education is offered by Dykstra and Law (1994), who “provide what they call a provisional theoretical framework for understanding social movements as educative forces” (Holst, 2002, p. 87). Their education elements in that provisional framework include critical pedagogy (with sub-elements of critical thinking, experiential learning, imagination, and dialogue), and a pedagogy of mobilization (including organizing and building, continuing participation, political action, and coalition and network building). Holst does adult education a favor by bringing these frameworks to the attention of the field of adult education, even while he worries they will not make as significant an impact on the field as he may like.

Elsewhere, in their review of the 2016 UNESCO report (GRALE III) on adult learning and education (ALE), Walters and Watters (2017) “argue for the importance of the broader nonformal and informal ALE, including popular education, as a means of challenging the 'post-truth society'” (p. 228). In doing so, they connect popular education and community organizing, suggesting that the close relationship between these two traditions may in fact hide the importance of community organizing within the broader adult education domain:

Popular adult education is widespread in many countries as people struggle for sustainable livelihoods, peaceful coexistence, meaningful work, decent housing, or renewable energies. It is a critically important part of ALE, but because it is often informal and nonformal, and is integrated into community organizing, it is largely invisible within GRALE III. (Walters & Watters, 2017, p. 235)

In this instance, the linkage is obscured because—like with Holst's frameworks—the work takes place within a conceptual domain of community organizing, and is not automatically entered into the lexicon and consciousness of adult education.

Relatedly, Schutz corroborates the claim that the overlaps of adult education and community organizing remain too poorly understood. He traces the historical and theoretical

underpinnings of personalist progressivism in middle-class visions of democratic practice and warns of the risk of conflating or even coopting key tenets of the community organizing tradition if it is subsumed within progressive adult education:

Only very recently in education have a small number of scholars begun to explore potential relationships between community organizing and education. But without a clear understanding of how the neo-Alinsky vision differs from more familiar progressive perspectives on democratic empowerment, there is a danger that the dominance of progressivism may lead education scholars to mistakenly reinterpret Alinsky's distinct perspective into more familiar progressive terms. (Schutz, 2010, p. 161)

In spite of the lingering lack of clarity on the topic, Schutz's analysis of Alinsky's version of community organizing emphasizes the conceptual overlap with adult education, describing how Alinsky saw the very purpose of his People's Organization as educational.

A more recent study of this overlap is provided by Earl (2018), who offers an exploration of possible models of pedagogical organization for new ways of thinking and enacting pedagogy in 'post-Seattle New Social Movements' such as the Occupy London movement of 2011-2014. In addition to looking at the teach-ins, the tent-city universities, the zines and other tangible educational instances used in these social movements, Earl also sought to go beyond that, to examine the "pedagogical social relations within these actions, ... in an attempt to understand what organizational forms might be realized in education in order to create the possibility of a transformative praxis for social justice and emancipatory learning" (Earl, 2019, p. 2).

Across these various literatures reviewed briefly above, the need to more carefully examine the conceptual and practical overlaps of community organizing and adult education arises from these three related realities, presented above: (1) elements of community organizing are central to adult education's historical roots; yet (2) some dominant adult education discourses neglect those roots, for one reason or another; and (3) among those who would attempt to readmit community organizing tenets into adult education, it is important to not dilute them in the process.

Conclusion: Towards a Tentative Typology

Having briefly reviewed these literatures and contexts (though the need for a more thorough review remains), it strikes me both that a typology of the overlap would be helpful, and that there are a number of angles from which such a typology could approach the overlap. One angle is to wonder about the directional nature of the relationship, if there is one. That is, are we

talking about (1) adult education *in* community organizing, (2) community organizing *in* adult education, (3) adult education *as* community organizing, or some other configuration. Another way to approach this question is by intentionally focusing on means, ends, and settings/contexts. That is, when attempting to understand the apparent overlap between adult education and community organizing, are we focused on: (1) means (e.g., practices, approaches, tools, tips, guidelines, case studies, etc.); (2) ends (e.g., ending poverty, racism, patriarchy, economic oppression and exploitation, etc.); and/or (3) settings and contexts (e.g., in community-based organizations, in social movements, in anarchistic collectives, in formal non-governmental organizations, in institutions of higher education, etc.). I suggest that by looking at all three of these angles we can come up with the most complete understanding of the overlap.

Practically speaking, a conceptual analysis of the overlap can potentially yield new insights for praxis, paying special attention to precepts and practices that include: Meeting people where they are; Facilitating participation; Naming and framing issues; Valuing narratives; Analyzing and working with power; Turning learning into action; and Centering social change and social justice. Informed by a rich theoretical background, these practices clearly populate the overlap between adult education and community organizing. This mutually informed praxis can in turn “free the powers” of learners, as Jane Addams (1902/2002) said, and can promote the “liberation of human creative potential and the mobilization of human resources for the solution of human problems” (Hall, 1978).

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