

DSJ, 2(1),
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Dialogues in Social Justice
An Adult Educational Journal

Reflections

Battered Not Broken

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Relecting on the 2016 voting season, we are challenged to think anew concerning the connection between the theory and practice of social justice and adult education. I suggest that we should mirror the mission of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE), and its call to “provide leadership for the field of adult and continuing education” (AAACE, 2017). It is my belief that as adult educators, we have not provided leadership for the field in addressing social justice issues because we have been battered and are fearful to address civic(s) topics. Battered is defined as “injured by repeated blows or punishment” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2017). Higher education has experienced repeated blows with the reduction of funding by state legislatures, the questioning of the value of higher education associated with student debt and remedial education, and a feeling of powerlessness and fear among many of my colleagues in the wake of the 2016 democratic process. I contend that as adult educators, we should recognize the 2016 voting results as a call to action to inculcate ourselves with the mission of AAACE, become advocates for higher education, and develop strategies for ourselves, our students, and the community. We must engage in civil dialogues that move us away from divisive political rhetoric and recapture our position as leaders in addressing social justice issues; we may be battered, but it is my belief that we are not broken.

AAACE mission and call to action

The mission of the American Association for Adults and Continuing Education (AAACE) compels us to be leaders, expanders, unifiers, developers, disseminators, promoters, and advocates (2017). By acting in this capacity, we will make a positive impact on civic discourse and social justice. We must advocate for higher education in state legislatures and promote to others the value and benefits of higher education. Academia has shown its value in addressing the problems of our society and requires its leaders to advocate for its continuance and growth. Individuals with a college degree have increased earnings, provide increased tax revenues, live healthier lifestyles, and are more active citizens (Baum, Ma, &

Payea, 2013). These attributes are needed to address social justice issues. As doctoral degree holders, we are ‘one percenters’; we have more formal education than 99% of the American population (Ryan & Siebens, 2012). As a one percenter, I have the responsibility to advocate, disseminate, and promote higher education. I have a duty and responsibility to use this ‘super power’ to pursue “relevant public policy and social change initiatives” called for in the AAACE mission (AAACE, 2017). My actions and practice must connect with the theory of adult education and the call from the AAACE mission. We must not be fearful to engage in advocacy after the results of the 2016 voting season, and should instead create opportunities for civic discourse with students, colleagues, and the community.

Strategies and courageousness

As adult educators, we must use our ‘super power’ to initiate and pursue dialogue to allow ourselves to honestly communicate opinions and ideas with others around controversial and potentially divisive topics. One strategy I employ is sharing part of my personal story to solicit stories of my students and create a dialogue around civic and social justice issues. Elements of my story include being a first-generation college graduate, growing up with ‘less than’, and being from a single parent home. By sharing my story, I am offering a view into my lived experiences. I expose my vulnerability to promote dialogue with students’ who may feel fearful of civic topics and social justice. As they hear my story and begin sharing parts of theirs, it offers an opportunity for all to hear different perspectives. It is my hope that this strategy will build an understanding and ability to engage in civic and social justice discourse. My goal is for students to see themselves as active participants in civic and social life which begin with being courageous and sharing part of our lived experience. Concurrently, this supports the AAACE mission as it expands opportunities for adult growth and development.

A platform developed and currently being used at Morehead State University is “CommUNITY Conversations” (Blakely & Clark, 2017). CommUNITY conversations conception is the result of faculty and staff working together to address the diverse needs of the campus. By collaborating with others within the university, a platform was developed that allows the community to hear and share different stories. Each CommUNITY conversation’s goal is to create new points of view through dialogue and discussion. Being open to individuals on the campus and the local community, CommUNITY conversations objectives are as follows:

- Create a hospitable space
- Expose attendees to unfamiliar ideas and perspectives
- Affirm or adjust personal perspective(s)
- Articulate steps to support healthy, inclusive communities
- Take action to advance an issue previously unknown or less familiar (Blakely & Clark 2017, 2017)

The ground rules of the conversations are that the conversation is not designed to attack, ostracize, marginalize, or belittle a person or a group of people. The conversation invites and honors unique contributions and sharing of insights and lived experiences that lead to self-discovery. Attendees are warned that the session and conversation may make some attendees

uncomfortable. Topics include *Race in America*, *From the Hood to the Holler*, *Whiteness: What does that mean?* and *LGBTQ and U*. The conversations are moderated by faculty and staff of the institution who are courageous and willing to share stories.

After each CommUNITY conversation, there is an opportunity for attendees to share their thoughts electronically through a Learning Management System (LMS) shell that is monitored by the organizers, moderators, and personnel from the office of Counseling and Health Services. This allows the conversation to continue as well as provides an opportunity for counseling support. The CommUNITY Conversations is just one tool used to initiate and pursue dialogue that allows us to courageously communicate ideas and opinions. CommUNITY Conversations is a means to disseminate information, build unity and promote the identity and standards of AAACE.

Now what

I desire to see higher education and adult education reclaim its responsibility and place in leading society and equipping the citizenry with tools to better engage in civic discourse and pursue social justice. As faculty, we have a responsibility to use our ‘super powers’ to be a leading force for social justice in our democratic society. As adult educators, we cannot be fearful and avoid our responsibility to lead in civic and social justice matters. We should consider the results of the 2016 democratic process as a call that more work needs to be done. We need to be part of the change we want to see. We are uniquely equipped to address these challenges in the classroom, on campus and in the community. Let us stop being battered; let us all lead, expand, unify, develop, disseminate, promote, and advocate for higher education and social justice as called for in the AAACE mission.

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