

Kansas State University Libraries

New Prairie Press

Adult Education Research Conference

Counter-hegemonic pedagogy: Activism and the life of the organic intellectual

Mervin E. Chisholm

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc>



Part of the [Adult and Continuing Education Commons](#), and the [Adult and Continuing Education Administration Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

This Event is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Adult Education Research Conference by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Counter-hegemonic pedagogy: Activism and the life of the organic intellectual

Mervin E. Chisholm¹

¹Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, The University of the West Indies, Mona, Kingston, Jamaica

Abstract

The continuing search for counter-hegemonic pedagogy is underscored. Aspects of the search are brought into the conversation and useful approaches for advancing emancipatory pedagogy are offered and discussed.

Keywords: counter-hegemonic, pedagogy, pedagogical activism, organic-intellectual

The purpose of this paper is to draw from the literature on emancipatory teaching and learning and the “organic intellectual” (Gramsci, 1971) especially in relation to the search for counter-hegemonic pedagogy and how it might be advanced. Further, this investigation will seek to understand the relationship between pedagogical activism and the scholarship of engagement (Boyer, 1996). Several major adult education scholars work in the area of emancipatory education (Brookfield 2005; Freire, 1970; Mezirow, 1991) and the seminal works of these authors have influenced scholars and practitioners in adult education and other fields to engage in educational/pedagogical activism in pursuit of social change and egalitarian relations in our world. Therefore, in this paper, I will look critically at this body of work in conversation with other literature on counter-hegemony and determine how it might inform the advancement of pedagogical activism in adult education.

Organic Intellectuals, Hegemony and Counter-hegemonic Practice

For Gramsci (1971), everyday life offered the opportunities for pedagogical interactions. However, the conditions of everyday life as they were experienced in the factory, the trenches, the school rooms, and the church pews were spaces where knowledge and social organization practices of a particular ideological bent were perpetuated. Traditional knowledge and traditional ways of operating were supportive of the ruling class. There was need for an alternative perspective and one way by which this might be achieved was by creating new ways of organizing everyday life, including the structures of material production, the family, and religion. So, one of the roles of the organic intellectual then was to create counter-hegemonic knowledge. In Gramsci’s work as an organic intellectual he also challenged the relations of power. He was not only a voice for the industrial workers in the factories of Turin, Italy. He organized the people and organized the knowledge they created in the interest of the social group where he served as their champion.

Organic intellectuals challenge the hegemonic ideology of the ruling class by calling attention to the contradictions experienced as they interact with the people in the trenches and are privy to their knowledge creation approaches and in fact, inspire and inform alternative approaches to knowledge creation and engagement. This organic intellectual is an adult educator/educator/ pedagogue who positions herself/himself as an educational leader in the adult learning landscape (formal or informal) and inevitably operates in the space as a cultural worker (Freire, 1998). Invariably, in the tradition of Paulo Freire (1970), this adult educator is clearly on the side of the oppressed and marginalized. S/he contests the educational landscape and other public spaces through resistance strategies that are designed to counteract oppressive regimes of the normal.

According to Brookfield (2005), “hegemony describes the way we learn to love our servitude” (p. 93). West (1982) describes a hegemonic culture as “a culture successful in persuading people ‘to consent’ to their oppression and exploitation” (p. 119). It is the process by which we are socialized to embrace enthusiastically a system of beliefs and practices that

end up harming us and working to support the interests of others who have power over us. In this regard, the work of Gramsci (1971) is instructive. From his perspective, “every relationship of hegemony is necessarily an educational relationship” (p. 350). In his writings on how to identify, and oppose hegemony, he develops a theory of learning that calls attention to the formation and development of critical consciousness. Further, in helping us to understand the ways in which educational practice is usable in the service of contesting hegemonic systems and structures that are associated with the ruling class, Gramsci in advancing this concept of the “organic intellectual” – an activist and persuader who is firmly involved in the work of the oppressed group, working with them, working for them, and working on their behalf. The “organic intellectual” was either conservative or radical. Gramsci focused more on those who worked on the behalf of the oppressed, the radical “organic intellectual.” Accordingly, many adult educators connect with Gramsci’s idea of the organic intellectual, seeing it as one way to think, and operate as educational practitioners working for social justice. Many also understand their work as catalytic since their practice of education becomes the catalyst of oppositional learning (Brookfield, 2005).

To be counter-hegemonic is to resist the definitions and understandings of reality and truth that the dominant groups in society proffer to further their own interest, for instance, ideations about race, gender, sexual orientation, economic arrangements of the society etc. Accordingly, the work of the “organic intellectual” has been theorised to involve pedagogical practices that are focused on the development of critical thinking skills and generally, the raising of consciousness and of course, ideological critique (Chisholm, 2021; Holtslander 1998). This involves examining the sociocultural realities in critical ways, especially distortions that undermine the fullness of the lives of the people. Ideological critique is important in examining systems such as capitalism, communism, or fascism. It also includes taking an in-depth critical look at how “economic, ecological, educational, linguistic, political, religious, bureaucratic, or other taken-for-granted cultural systems” (Mezirow, 1998, p. 193) have impacted human lives.

There are definitely clear indications from the adult education literature that teaching for critical thinking, critical reflection, the raising of consciousness or ideological critique are important pedagogical orientations and these are some of the ways the organic intellectual must operate. But pedagogical activism calls for greater levels of engagement with the community. In this regard, this work will discuss various other ways adult educators might actively embrace their roles as “organic intellectuals” engaging in activist educational practice, countering hegemonic pedagogy in the service of social justice in the 21st century.

Boyer (1990) called on higher education institutions to embrace a different understanding academic work eligible for professional advancement in the academy. Traditionally, academic work for faculty was considered to be teaching, research, and service. In this understanding, research was narrowly interpreted as the singular approach to knowledge creation. In contrast, Boyer proposed four interrelated approaches to academic work or scholarship: discovery, integration, application, and teaching. Subsequently, he expanded his definition of research to include the scholarship of engagement. This he explained is achieved when faculty is required to use knowledge that emerged from ones role as a member of faculty. The scholarship of engagement (Boyer, 1996) seems to be an area of involvement for persons who understand themselves as “organic intellectuals.” For Boyer, “The scholarship of engagement means connecting the rich resources of the university to our most pressing social, civic and ethical problems, to our children, to our schools, to our teachers and to our cities...”(Center for Engaged Learning, Teaching, and Scholarship, 2023, https://www.luc.edu/celts/engaged_scholars.shtml).

In this regard, adult educators might actively embrace the role of the “organic intellectual” and practice the scholarship of engagement through community engaged scholarship in the service of social justice in the 21st century. In this way, pedagogy can be affirmatively used in the service of countering hegemony. Brookfield (2017) went on to

suggest that educators must engage in activities that empower individuals and support all those who seek to rid themselves of oppressive forms of power. Empowerment is realised as persons are helped to interrogate received traditions (calcified knowledge etc.), create knowledge, and develop understanding of the issues surrounding oppression and liberation and of course, learning about ways that might be utilised to free oneself and the community from oppressive forms of power.

Teaching for Resistance

An orientation towards counter-hegemonic pedagogy is realised through educational work/activities, teaching in particular, curriculum development or educational development. A pedagogy of resistance might be embraced and engaged as a vehicle of educational activism. Critical and liberative discourses, for instance, critical theory, critical pedagogy, feminist pedagogy, radical forms of multicultural education and liberation theology are located within the resistance paradigm. They focus in one way or another on the liberation of oppressed people even as they present a vision of a more egalitarian and democratic society. Educational/pedagogical activism is usually informed by supportive philosophical or theoretical perspectives of that ilk. The liberation model of pedagogy expounded by Paulo Freire (1970) provides valuable insights. In this approach, the empowerment of oppressed persons is underscored and becomes the goal of the educational project.

Generally, resistance to hegemony is demonstrated in various ways. It can be detected in nonconformance, passivity, activity, knowledge and meaning. Various educational systems in the developed and developing world, both in neo-liberal and post-colonial societies have promoted conformity to the status quo (Chisholm, 2021, Denny, 2021, hooks, 1994). In many of these educational spaces, educational and other practices are exclusionary and perpetuate notions of superiority and inferiority. Some of these educational spaces are operated in ways that allow domination and subordination of students. Sometimes these are overt but, in many instances, they are subtle. At other times, they are covert and deliberate (Warrican, 2020; Williams, 2017). They invite opposition and resistance. The approach to this might be educational /curricula reform. However, Denny (2021) observes that "education reform will not be meaningful if it operates within a social vacuum, being perceived as void of social-historical context" (p.1). For instance, educational reform must explore the embedded nature of Americanism and Eurocentrism within curricula and generally, spaces of teaching and learning, then eradicate them.

Hegemony has been advanced by the practice of culturally oppressive curriculum processes and activities. Much of the educational activity then and now (especially in English speaking countries) elevated American and European cultural norms and forms as the dominant regime for human representation and these have been experienced as oppressive. Pedagogical activism calls adult educators to simultaneously design curriculum practices that tell stories about the cultural experiences of the students they serve. Battiste's (2013) work identifies the need for collaborative conscientization, which requires unlearning notions of meritocracy and superiority imposed on cultures that are not Eurocentric. Hence, she calls for education to address knowledge-making to include other ways of interpreting the world. Further, through decolonization, teaching and learning become a culturally responsive act; intentionally prioritizing students lived experiences within these spaces (hooks, 1994).

Pedagogical Arrangements to Honour Student Voices

Adult educators need to ask questions about their pedagogical arrangements and how they are honouring student voices in the pedagogies they embrace and utilize. The practice of honouring student voices has long been recognised as important in sites of teaching and learning in adult education (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994; Sheared & Sissel, 2001). The task of making space for students' voices to be heard (Sheared & Sissel, 2001) and creating participatory spaces (hooks, 1994) is extremely important within educational practice framed as liberatory. When teaching and learning opportunities facilitate engaging dialogue so that learners are "communicative partners" with adult educators or "critical co-investigators" over and above the mere transfer

of information, there is the potential of enabling greater levels of self-identity to develop. Engaging dialogue (an emancipatory educational practice) must be preferred over and above the banking approach since sectarian indoctrination thrives in the banking approach. In an emancipatory educational project, the knowledge of the student must be recognised as important and of course, the educational process must create opportunities for that knowledge to be the starting point for teaching and learning. Respecting the knowledge and life experiences of learners are ways to underscore the importance of the human persons.

Operating as “critical co-investigators” in the classroom affords students opportunities to examine various perspectives and reflect on their lived experiences, reflect on the subject matter content, listen, and talk back to adult educators and colleagues. In the process, metacognitive strategies are pressed into service. Metacognitive strategies have been shown to advance learning in huge ways (Steiner & Foote, 2017). Further, Sayles-Hannon (2007) points out that education must focus more on information transformation rather than information transfer. Information transformation is understood as follows:

a process of learning that encourages self-reflection, critical thinking, dialogue, and action oriented practices. Information transformation departs from merely transmitting knowledge and incites a journey of knowledge renovation that changes students and teachers in a meaningful way. The development of a transformative education places the student’s reflective processes at the heart of the learning experience (p.33).

Positioning students as “critical coinvestigators or “communicative partners” enables information transformation to be realised. This is also an effective approach to undermining authoritarian relations in the classroom. The use of this strategy calls for guiding students to an emancipatory questioning of the received tradition. Opportunities for collaboration and cooperation in learning are possible as well and are easily facilitated using team or group learning approaches which would be useful in the quest for community building relationships.

Decolonization

Counter-hegemonic pedagogy calls for an activism that embraces an orientation towards decolonization. Decolonization work should be employed within contexts bedevilled by historical engagement with Euro-American ways of understanding reality in order to transform the practices (both how we think about them and how they are engaged).

“Decolonizing has to be wholistic in terms detoxing our spirits, hearts, minds, and bodies (Absolon, 2019). Several educators and researchers have called for the examination of deeply held notions of Eurocentrism (Chisholm, 2021, Denny, 2021, Warrican, 2020 and Williams, 2017) as the dominant ideological persuasion guiding curriculum work in English speaking countries.

There is much research that indicates that mindset is a critical factor to success in several areas (Miller, 2009). By mindset, the focus is on how the mind has been set to process information and their outworking in our lives. Mindset is concerned with one’s mentality, psyche, outlook, and ways of understanding, interpreting, and responding to situations. Educators must look to the possibility of decolonization of the mind as a major focus point for the pursuit of liberation and empowerment. In this regard, decolonizing the mind is about unlearning and then creating an alternative response to a particular approach, unlearning and relearning. In this regard, the mindset that is operational in the lives of learners must be investigated and where problematic, disrupted and dislodged.

Cultural Worker

Tarlau (2014) observes that scholars of critical pedagogy have called for “a recasting of the teacher as intellectual or cultural worker,” (p. 57). For Gramsci (1971), the cultural worker was about the community leader serving as an educational leader and an organic intellectual. This is about recognising the demands of the context and serving as an activist in the educational landscape. It requires the development of knowledge and understanding concerning the various cultural divisions that are present in the educational landscape and the society. This creates possibilities to successfully engage in counter-hegemonic pedagogy. The educator must

appraise herself/himself of the hegemonic forces at work in the society and in particular, how they are manifested in the classroom and work for their eradication.

As a cultural worker focused on resistance and decolonization, adult educators must reject any movement or strategies that are remotely supportive of enslavement or re-enslavement (neo-colonialism). This work is about contesting and opposing oppressive regimes that might present themselves as normal, having hidden agendas of re-enslavement/neo-colonialism. Activist cultural workers are needed to detect the ways and means by which new forms of enslavement are introduced.

Reflection

The development of transformative education calls for the utilisation of teaching and learning approaches that places the students' and teachers' reflective processes at the very heart of the of teaching and learning. Reflection and critical reflection are important for meaning making (Roessger, 2017) and certainly is acclaimed by some to be defining characteristics of adult learning (Brookfield, 2012, Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020; Mezirow, 1991). There is a place for reflective practice within adult education especially when the overall aim is counter-hegemonic pedagogy and to consciously embrace one's practice as activism. Reflection is to be located at the centre of the learning experiences:

Reflective practice is a deliberate pause to assume an open perspective, to allow for higher - level thinking processes. Practitioners use these processes for examining beliefs, goals, and practices, to gain new or deeper understandings that lead to actions that improve learning for students. Actions may involve change in behavior, skills, attitudes, or perspectives within an individual, partner, small group or school (York-Barr, Sommers, Ghore & Montie, 2001 as cited in Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 172).

Reflection ought to play a critical role in an adult educator's professional official engagements, especially in relation to action and learning from action. As an active process, reflection requires adult educators to challenge their assumptions even as they think about their practice and how it might be improved. Challenging one's assumptions calls on educators to engage in critical engagement of their work. Moore and Lewis-Fokum (2016) underscore the importance of the adult educator being a reflective/reflexive practitioner. This reflective/reflexive practitioner is one who understands the impact of self-conscious reflection on himself/herself as an agent and will create opportunities for his or her students to utilise "metacognitive opportunities" to reflect on subject matter content as well. These learning opportunities should be associated with insightful recommendations about how to proceed. It is in these instances that the adult educator might influence students to think critically about issues of power and identity in emancipatory ways. Moore and Lewis-Fokum (2016) also pointed out that educators need to engage in a "pedagogy of autonomy" (p.92) whereby they are actively involved in their own retraining to enhance their knowledge, skills, and awareness so that they are more equipped for the counterhegemonic pedagogy and of course, develop greater sensitivity to issues of the critical issues of social justice education. The adult educator should interrogate the self within the tenets of developing one's agency as an organic intellectual.

Adult educators engage in the intellectual processes of reflection, analysis, and interpretation in pursuit of counter-hegemonic pedagogy within the context of an educational practice that has activism as one of its major hallmarks. Reflective practice calls on adult educators to think about their espoused theories and their theories in use and face up to the distinctions that exist between them. Reflection is understood to assist professionals to learn about and improve their practice. Schon pointed out that reflection can be continuous and synchronous with teaching (reflection-in-action) or it may occur sometime after teaching and in that case it was considered asynchronous reflection or retrospective reflection (reflection-on-action) (Schon 1987 in Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Reflection-in-action reshapes "what we are doing while we are doing it" (Schon 1987 in Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p.172). It is about "thinking on your feet." Schon (1987) feels professional

development is enhanced by reflection-in-action. Practising one's craft as "professional artistry" is a demonstration of the impact of reflection on professional development. This is seen in, for instance, the professional's ability to make informed changes to presentation/teaching in response to participant feedback in a session as the session progresses (Schon 1987 in Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p.172). In following the thinking of Schon, he argues that the most important areas of professional practice are not the instrumental areas that we fulfil using technical knowledge. The hallmark of professional practice is to utilise instrumental knowledge based on our technical skills and negotiate areas of uncertainty, uniqueness, and value conflict, utilising wisdom, intuition, and artistry. Professional artistry is demonstrated in moments of highly effective practice when the practitioner can combine professional knowledge, knowledge of the unique situation or the requirements of the moment and respond accurately and meaningfully to the current need. Schön indicates that this must not be construed as a gift, but it must be understood as a process of 'knowing in action' which is often combined with 'reflection in action' (Schon 1987 in Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007).

Conclusion

Pedagogical activism has a place in adult education and is certainly useful as one embraces counter-hegemonic pedagogy. It also has a place within the scholarship of engagement (Boyer, 1996) as the educator connects various resources of the university with social problems and seeks to utilize them to respond to the needs for social justice education. It is important in adult education because each generation of adult educators must respond to the needs of the time. Pedagogy is never neutral and it is folly to think otherwise. If we are committed to the advancement of humankind, then we must take the side of the sustainability of human life, value and worth through active engagement in our world and through the use of the pedagogical space at our disposal to inform, educate and persuade others to come on this journey with us in seeking and working for a more egalitarian society.

References

- Absolon, K. (2019). Decolonizing Education and Educators' Decolonizing. *Intersectionalities: A Global Journal of Social Work Analysis, Research, Polity, and Practice*.
- Battiste, M. (2013). *Decolonizing education: Nourishing the learning spirit*. Saskatoon: Purich Publishing Limited.
- Boyer, E. (1990). *Scholarship reconsidered: Priorities of the professoriate*. Menlo Park, CA: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching
- Boyer, E. (1996). The scholarship of engagement. *Journal of Public Outreach*. 1(1), 11-20.
- Brookfield, S. (2005). *The power of critical theory*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Brookfield, S. (2012). *Teaching for critical thinking*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- Brookfield, S. (2017). *Becoming a critically reflective teacher* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass
- Center for Engaged Learning, Teaching, and Scholarship, 2023, https://www.luc.edu/celts/engaged_scholars.shtml
- Chisholm M. E. (2016). Continuous curriculum development: An approach for quality curriculum development in the Caribbean. *The UWI Quality Education Forum*, 21, 63-87.
- Chisholm, M.E (2021). Counter- hegemonic pedagogical practice: The role of Caribbean emancipatory pedagogy. *Caribbean Curriculum*, 28.
- Campano, G., Ghiso, M.P., Yee, M., Pantoja, A. (2013). Toward community research and coalitional literacy practice for educational justice. *Language Arts* 90(5), 314-326.
- Denny, L. S. (2021) *Eduocracy: A model of the new West Indian plantocracy in Barbados*. Sage Publications. Inc.