



Reflections

Adult Education Research: Can It Advance Social Justice?

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PAT'S DILEMMA

Karin and I got to know each other several years ago when I started my doctorate in Adult Education, and she was assigned as my advisor. As we were working together to help frame my dissertation study, I reflected back on my first exposure to Myles Horton and Paulo Freire (1990) and Stephen Brookfield (2005), and how their writings framed my understanding of adult education. I now view adult education as so much more than the teaching and learning of adults; it is about supporting adults to see—really see—the entirety of the society in which they live: how it functions; how it oppresses some and rewards others; how it operates on fear and injustice; and, most intriguing to me, how all forms of media serve as a tool both to perpetuate and bring to light a wide range of societal oppressions. Wright and Sandlin's (2009) research and writings on public and critical public pedagogy were the impetus for me to start my journey into understanding how media, including social media platforms as sites of public pedagogy, could be used to perpetuate certain cultural norms and viewpoints.

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As I neared the end of my coursework, I worked with Karin to delve further into understanding public pedagogy, which refers to the sites of education, mis-education, and learning that are beyond the realm of formal educational institutions and which are encountered in all areas of a society's culture (Sandlin, Wright, & Clark, 2011). It was at this point when I really started to

think more deeply about what was being learned as people used social media platforms like Facebook, who or what was controlling the messages presented there, and how those messages could change or solidify a particular cultural order. Specifically, I wondered about the influence of political news on social media, especially because the concept of *news* has morphed into crowd-sourced content with the advent of the always accessible, always new, always attention-grabbing, hashtag-trending content floods in our social media feeds.

In addition to exploring social media as a site of public pedagogy, I began to explore the concept of reflection and how reflection plays a part in learning – learning that could lead to action. Dewey (1933), Freire (2000), Mezirow (1991), Bandura (1986), Brookfield (2005), and numerous other scholars have examined the role reflection plays in learning and in the potential for taking action for change. Reflection and the resulting changes, I thought, were what I needed to examine in my dissertation. Recognizing that social media is a site of public pedagogy, and the role reflection plays in learning from social media, especially the learning about political topics on social media were key considerations in determining this would be my research focus. In my perspective, without learning that leads to a change in learner’s understanding of the world and of the society in which they live, the action and activism needed to address social justice and the ever-growing social inequalities will not occur. I believe reflection is the glue that connects learning to action.

Here, I must stop and make a confession: even though I frequently discuss social justice issues, like a woman’s right to choose, income and housing inequality, and systemic racism with a wide range of people, I have not participated in the Women’s March, I don’t attend political rallies, and I am not a regular member of any social justice-oriented group. To continue research for my dissertation, I needed to examine what I perceived to be a disconnect between my beliefs and values and my actions. As I spent many hours reflecting on this, I sought to find the answer – if I was so passionate about social justice, why was I not doing something; going to marches, showing up at rallies, or anything other than talking and reading about it? Or, perhaps the research I was planning to conduct might offer an opportunity to help. Could what I might find about how adults learn from social media actually advance social justice, even in some small way?

I knew I needed to confer with Karin before I could reconcile my conflicting feelings about the value of my research. Because she is my dissertation advisor, her advice was not surprising, but it turned out to be extremely beneficial. She suggested I write a brief reflection about why I chose my dissertation topic, so I would be able to more clearly see how my study might not only be worth doing, but also could serve as the foundation on which others might expand.

PAT AND KARIN: THE PUBLIC PEDAGOGY OF SOCIAL MEDIA

To try to find out if my research could advance social justice issues, I wanted to go back and reflect on what I knew so far about social media and the learning that might take place there. It seemed that when social media started to be widely used by the general public, it was a place to show off your life – exotic vacation spots and fabulous restaurants you visited, your

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popularity with friends, and your talented children. People became enamored with receiving likes and comments, which served almost as a gauge of popularity. Both Karin, now my advisor, and I were late to the party. Karin joined Facebook around 2009, after some of her friends and

co-workers started talking about fun things they posted or saw there. I joined around the same time after being encouraged by some friends and family members. It really seemed like Facebook, then Twitter, and later Instagram and Snapchat were great tools to stay connected to lots of friends, barely-friends, and even friends of friends, whom we did not even really know. As someone new to the concepts of public pedagogy in adult education, I never thought about what the millions of other Facebook users, and I, were learning about ourselves and each other, not seeing that using it had developed into an exercise in how we presented ourselves to others. I recognized that Facebook had its flaws, including questioning what private means, playing addictive games, taking meaningless quizzes, wasting time instead of working, determining which parts of our lives were worth sharing, and using the “it’s complicated” label, which only served to cloud the already muddy waters of romantic relationships.

Looking back now, I did not realize how my thinking, especially about political topics including social justice issues, was becoming more and more narrow, as the Facebook platform was limiting what I saw to content posted by people who were similar to me; most of them lived the same middle-class, White, privileged life that I live. I do not think it took very long for Facebook to change and for me to change along with it. Ads and sponsored posts, news, and posts from those barely-friends began to show up in my social media feeds, as Facebook, now a publicly-traded company, needed to increase earnings. Even though I had previously worked in the technology field, it did not prevent my own blindness to the influence social media was having on my own thoughts and ideas. As my reflection process led me to this awareness, it was becoming clear to me that social media had a broad influence on how and what I was learning about political and social topics. But I wondered, how could my research make others aware of this influence as well?

As Karin and I got to know each other when I started my doctorate in Adult Education, I often discussed what I found in my social media feeds with her, including what my fellow students were posting, what her fellow faculty were posting, and what the university was posting. We also spent a good deal of time discussing political content, news, and opinions that emerged in social media, and then were reported on in more traditional media outlets, such as viral videos and most retweeted posts.

I recognized that social media platforms, like most forms of media productions, are owned by profit-motivated corporations and that they earn most of their revenue by allowing other companies access to their users' information so they could place ads or sponsored content into users' feeds. As 2015 drifted into 2016, I recall that more and more information came to the forefront about how social media platforms leverage algorithms: the complex groups of programming codes developed to help social media companies determine what we would most likely purchase, so they could place targeted ads based on what we view, post, like, and/or share. The algorithms were also able to deliver content designed to keep us on the site for longer and longer periods of time, as well as collect enormous amounts of information about our habits. The more I learned about how social media algorithms work, the more I recognized that social media users had lost much of their autonomy to select their own feed content. What we were learning on social media was largely based on content being fed to us by algorithms – algorithms programmed by people who have a certain point of view and purpose. Given the influence that algorithms have on what we see on social media platforms, I felt sure that they could greatly affect what we learn from social media about a range of topics, including social justice issues. Would my research show that algorithms restricted what could be learned about social justice issues?

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Oddly enough, it seems as though the same algorithmically-driven social media platforms that wanted to sell things to and about us, also exposed us to social justice movements like #MeToo, #TimesUp, #BlackLivesMatter, #NotInMyName, and others that aimed to highlight the voices of those who have been oppressed, based on gender, race, or religion. Did this content show up in my social media feeds simply because they were trending? As I considered all of these issues, I became more interested in examining if we were really learning or just blindly reacting to social media content about social justice issues. Could what we learned on social media about these hashtag movements really move the needle on social justice, as some researchers posit (Brym, Godbout, Hoffbauer, Menard, & Zhang, 2014; Harlow, 2012)? Or, did they just provide us with a momentary awareness of the oppressed before we moved our attention to the next post in our feed? Was there any benefit to using social media to advance social justice issues, especially if extremist groups also use the same platforms to reach and influence people?

As Karin and I reflected on and discussed all of these points as part of my overall dissertation study topic, what I have come to realize is that I *am* doing something to advance social justice. We and all of the other adult educators, who are conducting research to help others better understand how adult learning is influenced by social media and sharing our research findings, are taking action to further the ideals of a just society. Overcoming generations of the systemic racism, misogyny, and income inequality baked into our culture and ideology is not an easy task; however, we must start somewhere. Thus, I am cautiously optimistic as I continue to work on my research that I will discover that social media is a site of learning where reflection that leads to action is possible, so that social justice can be advanced through this complex, pervasive medium.

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