



Reflections

The Future of Social Justice in Adult Education

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When I do presentations around the country the question I most dread is “what do you see as the future of adult education?” There is pretty much nothing I feel confident making predictions about. I always regard marriage as a year-to-year arrangement (I’m coming up to 30 of those temporary arrangements), I am constantly surprised by the ways technology changes my work and the nature of interpersonal communication (such as the ubiquity of texting), and I am usually taken aback by major political developments such as a Black President in my lifetime, or the re-election of George W. Bush.

So I have to admit, a little shamefacedly, that I really have no idea about the future of social justice in adult education. About all I can say is that there will be a future. There will be a future because for the most part people do not go into adult education for money, prestige, status or an easy life. ESL teachers for example must be some of the most exploited service workers in the country. People become adult educators because, however naïve it may sound, they want to create a better world. They want to help people get a fair bite of the cherry, increase political participation, promote activism in marginalized communities, and help the exploited and homeless make a living wage. I have met adult educators in all kinds of settings – the Occupy movement, the Marine Corps, vocational trades, corporate America, indigenous social movements, arts organizations, proprietary schools, software design groups, churches, oil companies, even banks. It is striking to me how those who identify as adult educators consistently use the language of empowerment or agency when speaking of what they want for learners. There is an often expressed, widespread desire to help people take control of their lives, exercise some kind of self-determination, and develop the self-confidence to promote some kind of activism. I see no evidence of that commitment disappearing.

Behind this language sits the beginning of a social justice orientation. When people say they want to help people get a place at the table, have their voice heard, help them make a difference – all the clichés we hear articulated so often – they are trying to make the world a better place. Even if it is not explicitly expressed there is a desire to redress perceived inequities, to right social and organizational wrongs. So I do not see the desire for justice, even if not explicitly articulated, disappearing anytime soon.

But justice is a stronger, tougher, more uncompromising word than empowerment or agency. After all, corporations can empower leaders to be more creative and democratic in how they run their departments, but this is always within the context of producing greater corporate profits. Managers can be empowered

to find new ways to cut costs and increase shareholder dividends. Professionals can be urged to exercise agency in finding new ways to privatize public services.

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Justice, however, seeks to overturn the notion of profit as the dominant project of human organizations. It always implies a critique of the existing order and, as such, it is necessarily partisan. It requires taking sides, running risks and bringing the powers that be down on your head. If you work for justice you will inevitably make enemies. Wear your enemies with pride. They are badges of honor showing that you are doing something of consequence.

Justice is often spoken of as a grand narrative of big social projects – replacing capitalism with socialism, overcoming White supremacy, abolishing patriarchy realizing true democracy and so on. But an enormous amount of justice work takes place in the pockets and crevices of everyday life and practice.

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Certainly, we can unionize, create revolutionary parties, build social movements, take to the streets, and develop community organizations: but we can also call out racist micro-aggressions when we see them, promote curriculum that challenges the status quo, oppose destructive organizational priorities or take the necessarily vague language of mission statements and co-opt it for unexpected purposes. Justice work is done in big movements but also in small actions.

So what will the future of social justice in adult education look like?

It will take multiple forms

I do not see a grand unifying project for justice work, whether it be the peace movement, creating participatory democracy, ushering in a socialist economy, or establishing some form of anti-statist anarchy involving a network of self-governing local communities.

The best we can hope for is that those trying to work for justice in particular contexts – around rape prevention, opposing militarism, doing anti-racism, combatting homelessness or advocating for a living wage – see the intersections of their work. After all homelessness is a result of capitalism's workings, in this case a lack of affordable housing and paying jobs. Both of these are caused by corporations' desire to treat shelter as a source of profit, to export jobs to countries where exploitable labor exists, and to use technology to cut labor costs.

Particular acts of spousal abuse or rape are connected to the power of patriarchal structures and ideology that promote the notion that men, because of their superior intellect, logic and physical strength, have the power to determine women's behavior. Patriarchal logic holds that men can judge when a 'No' means 'Yes', and when consent can be considered as given even if explicitly withdrawn. The militaristic emphasis on breaking down individuality to make compliance easier to obtain, and the accompanying celebration of male strength, also contribute to a culture in which men consider they have the power to coerce sex and punish female resistance. Capitalism's desire to have a source of cheap, exploitable labor produces a racist ideology that dehumanizes a whole group of people by viewing them as less than human.

It will be simultaneously exhausting and exhilarating

Working for justice is exhausting and exhilarating. Most people do it because they feel they have no choice in the matter. Something just needs to be done. There is no sense of self-congratulation on one's morality, just an urgency to change situations that drive you crazy because they are so patently wrong, so clearly unfair. Justice work takes a toll. By definition the enemy has the majority of resources and you have to rely on your wits and creativity to out-think opponents.

Justice work is also exhilarating in the sense of comradeship it brings.

Organizing for neighborhood, organizational or political change is a long hard slog. You build something one person at a time and usually with nothing other than your powers of persuasion. And you are not just persuading someone of the merits of a specific, local action. You are actually taking on historically shaped dominant ideologies that have been internalized as common sense truth. Sometimes the structures you are trying to change have a presumed legitimacy simply because they have been there for so long. Ideological manipulation has been very successful at convincing people that the way the world is currently arranged works for the greatest good of the greatest number. Capitalism is equated with liberty and freedom, White supremacy and patriarchy skillfully reconfigure themselves to convince people that we live in a post-racial, post-feminist world, and militarism promotes the catch all slogan of the 'war on terrorism' to justify the use of force abroad (the Iraq war) and at home (the use of paramilitary tactics and equipment for crowd control in Ferguson, Missouri).

But justice work is also exhilarating in the sense of comradeship it brings. People do this work from a sense of common outrage – a shared commitment that “this shall not stand”. For activists to realize that their sense of individual indignation is a shared fury is wonderfully confirming. It helps combat the radical pessimism that inevitably accompanies justice work, the sense that puny little you is standing alone taking on impossibly enormous social forces and institutions. And when you do have a victory, no matter how small, the feeling that you have made a difference (to use a truly cringeworthy cliché) is wonderful.

It needs permanent organizations

Single-issue politics and movements can achieve great things but the enduring struggle for social justice – in adult education or anywhere else – needs some sort of permanent organizing force. On a large scale, this might be a new revolutionary political party. I do not see how significant, long term, structural change is secured without a permanent organization of some kind setting up local chapters, mobilizing people in different communities and then putting them in contact with each other to pursue a clearly articulated vision. This organization might not look like the political parties or unions of the past, and maybe social media will be a speedy tool for mobilization, as has been proved in all manner of street protests. But nothing will replace the painstaking daily work of on the ground organizing.

I will be proved wrong about pretty much everything I just wrote

That is the prediction I feel most confident about. I can make guesses like the ones in this short piece, and I can extrapolate from the past. But I am absolutely confident that if I were able to rise from the grave in fifty years' time I would be astonished at how wrong I was.

Biography



Stephen Brookfield

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He has worked in community, adult and higher education in North America and Britain for 45 years.