

Chapter One

Conceptualizing Adult Learning and Education

We live in interesting times. The election of the nation's first biracial president, the apparent collapse of capitalism (apparent, not actual, owing to the massive government bailout of financial institutions that "are so big they can't be allowed to fail"), immersion in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and regular accusations from cable news commentators that we are on the verge of socialism in the U.S.—a claim viewed with much bemusement by European socialists. In a sense, these times begat this book. It has its genesis in the reactions of the two of us to the 2003 invasion of Iraq by the U.S. and Britain. One of us was born in the United States, the other born in England, and, as CNN beamed footage of the troops entering Baghdad, we asked ourselves how it had come to pass that these two countries had acted in direct defiance of the world and, in the case of Britain, in defiance of the clear majority of its citizens. As adult educators, both of us were concerned to explore the kinds of learning people undertook in order to organize mass protests against the war and the way they learned to fight back against the Bush and Blair administrations' ideological push.

As it happened, the Australian Mike Newman beat us to the punch publishing his magnificent *Teaching Defiance* (2006). But 2003 was the spur for the two of us to do a great deal of thinking about the way adult education seems to have lost its moorings and become uncoupled from its traditional, mainstream view of itself as a movement to create and build democracy. It also prompted us to think a lot about adult education's traditional concern to

develop critical thinkers and the responsibility this necessarily entails of countering any process of brainwashing or ideological manipulation. This book is our attempt to remind ourselves, and the field, of how adult learning and the practice of adult education have traditionally been concerned with the health of participatory democracy. Indeed, for many adult educators across the world the most important project for the field, and the most significant contribution of adult learning, has been learning how to extend participatory democracy into the economic sphere, that is, with the creation of democratic and cooperative socialism.

These days, to talk of adult learning and education in the same breath as democracy or socialism can seem either hopelessly out of date (after all, many would say adult education should be focused on “skilling” or “retooling” America’s workforce to compete in the global economy) or completely utopian (especially when viewed in the light of where federal and state funds overwhelmingly go for adult education—that is, to workforce training or basic skills). That this has not always been the case can be seen by studying what in previous decades were the writings of “mainstream” adult educators such as Lyman Bryson. Bryson, a well-published professor at Teachers College, Columbia University, was very active in the chief professional organization of his day, the American Association for Adult Education (AAAE).

In 1936 Lyman Bryson published his landmark text simply titled *Adult Education* in which he urged teachers of adults to inculcate principles of rational skepticism in adult learners that would help them “to stand firmly against the winds of doctrine” (p. 64). The mark of a good teacher for Bryson was the degree to which she helped adult students “to acquire a more alert attitude toward their already accepted and verbalized beliefs, and toward all new things offered them” (p. 65). The ability to do this was “the hallmark of a fit teacher for grown men and women” (p. 65). In other words, adult education was about teaching people to resist dominant ideology—such as that capitalism was a natural way of ordering the economic affairs of society and ultimately worked to the benefit of all, that the massive amount of material wealth possessed by the United States permitted it to act as an imperial invader, and that we live in a society distinguished by vigorous freedom of the press. In pursuing these aims, however, Bryson warned that

teachers of adults would earn the dislike, criticism, and ridicule of society and its leaders. Bryson was as mainstream as it is possible to get in the field in the 1930s, a fact illustrated by his pressuring Alain Locke to prohibit the publication of a manuscript by W.E.B. DuBois in the African Negro Folk Associates Series of the American Association for Adult Education (a manuscript we view as crucial to the conceptualization of the field and that we examine in this book) because of its Marxism and Pan-Africanism (see Guy, 1993; Guy and Brookfield, 2009). Yet 70 years after Bryson wrote *Adult Education*, he now sounds daringly radical. That is a damning indictment of how conservative and fearful the field has become.

The Meaning of Radical

Most discussions of the term *radical* begin by saying it means getting down to the roots of something to discover its essence. In this sense, radical adult education would mean returning to the roots of adult education to rediscovering its essential purpose and mission. But what comprises the roots of the field depends very much on whose history is being consulted. For every historical example of mechanics institutes or worker cooperatives, one could cite counterexamples of adult education for cultural genocide or for the education of an officer class of an occupying army. The question is whose roots we are getting back to and whose purposes and practices we seek to rediscover. So, clearly, we need establish at the start of this book what we mean by radical.

Lens begins his book *Radicalism in America* (1969) declaring that “the role of the radical throughout the ages has been as an antidote to privilege” (p. 1) and that “where the byword for the reactionary is self-interest, for the radical it is equality—either full equality in which all things are held in common, or, short of that, equality of opportunity. To level the material differences between men (*sic*), to replace hate with love, division with unity, war with peace—these have been the goals of the radical” (p. 1). Like Lens, we link radicalism to the abolition of privilege and creation of full material equality and, like him, we believe this entails two intertwined ideas: democracy and socialism. In his analysis Lens states “until early in the nineteenth century the radical fought in the main for a subversive concept called democracy; subsequently

it was a subversive concept called socialism” (pp. 2–3). For us the radical purpose and practice of adult education is concerned with organizing education for and encouraging learning about the creation of democracy in political, cultural, and economic spheres. Political and cultural democracy entails learning how to recognize and abolish privilege around race, gender, status, and identity; economic democracy entails learning how to abolish material inequality and privilege around class. Both, in turn, entail the collective determination of how societal resources are to be used for the common good—in shorthand terms, socialism.

In one sense, this commitment to participatory political democracy and collective economic democracy (socialism) can’t really be regarded as radical if by that term we mean returning to the roots of the field in the U.S. Quite simply, the U.S. has never had the creation of economic democracy—whether that be called participatory economics or *parecon* (Albert, 2003), cooperative economics or democratic socialism—as the chief project of adult education. Political democracy has been valorized and relatively uncontested, but not economic democracy. To argue for that has been seen as too radical in a country in which, apart from “blips” such as the Great Depression of the 1930s, capitalism has been unquestioningly celebrated as the most liberating and free of all economic forms. There have always been those in the field who saw adult education as education for economic democracy, or socialism, of course, but we would argue that they have never represented the field’s mainstream.

In contrast, Stephen Brookfield grew up in England where the legacy of Mansbridge, Tawney, and Williams *was* the predominant tradition. Even though many see the hugely influential Workers’ Education Association (WEA) as liberal rather than progressive, for him the connection of adult education to democratic socialism was quite clear and not very daring or remarkable. Socialism and patriotism were never seen as opposed, and the idea that citizens have basic survival needs met was viewed as blindingly obvious. Even Tony Blair, as he campaigned for his first term of office as British prime minister, felt compelled to speak about the kind of socialism he wanted (market-driven socialism that rewarded entrepreneurship).

Adult Education and Democratic Socialism

Of course our thinking of adult education as a force for political detoxification, or as an element in any significant oppositional movement, represents our own agenda as adult educators. Many in the field would profoundly disagree with this agenda and advance completely different views concerning the proper purposes for adult education. They might claim that adult educators should be neutral and should stay out of or be above politics. They might argue that the most useful purpose of adult education is to equip adult workers with the skills they need to flourish in the global economy of the 21st century. For some of the most influential, adult education's location is within the workplace, particularly corporate training, rather than in oppositional, grassroots movements.

Adult education is, like all sectors of organized education, a contested sphere. Different actors within this sphere have contrasting and sometimes contradictory agendas. However, no matter what the setting—an auto-repair class, a basic skills literacy program, a community meeting held to decide how to oppose the building of a Wal-Mart, an executive development seminar, an extension agent teaching crop rotation techniques, an antiracist agit-prop theater piece, a union organizer explaining procedures to unionize—the adult education tradition insists that these things happen democratically. The core purpose of adult education for the two of us is to build participatory democracy, and to that degree we are well in the historical mainstream. The break from that mainstream comes from our contention that democracy can only be realized if it is economic as well as political, which is where socialism comes in.

For us socialism and democracy are inseparable, and this is why to talk about adult education for democracy is, in our view, to talk about adult education for socialism. We are not alone in this, of course. For example, Myles Horton recognized the inseparability of socialism and democracy when he constantly stressed that political democracy is meaningless without its economic counterpart. But it is hard to focus on exactly what comprises a socialist perspective. As reviewers of socialism in the U.S. (for example Howe, 1986) point out, it is more accurate to talk of “socialisms” in the plural, given the different strands of theorizing and the different models of

practice proposed that bear that descriptor. For example, Michael Newman's (2005) (not the Australian adult educator) recent short introduction to the idea examines how it is interpreted in Cuban communism, Swedish social democracy, materialist feminism, and ecological socialism, among other movements. These multiple interpretations sometimes mean that a depressingly predictable feature of debate among left-leaning movements is acrimony regarding which particular group, organization, or tendency is the true guardian and correct interpreter of the flame. Monty Python's Flying Circus hilariously parodied this in their comedy *Life of Brian*.

For us democratic socialism is a political and economic arrangement designed to answer one fundamental question: How best can we arrange society to foster compassion and enhance creativity? In our opinion such a society would be one in which, as much as it was humanly possible, fundamental survival needs (food, shelter, water, medical care) were met so that people's energies could be directed away from basic survival toward the realization of creativity in the widest possible forms. This would require that the available physical and human resources be commonly owned and controlled—stewarded, used, and distributed for the good of all. A crucial feature is that this stewardship is “subjected to democratic control from below by the people and their communities” (Harrington, 1992, p. 9).

The point to common ownership, control, and stewardship would be to create the optimal conditions for different people to pursue their individual passions and widely varying enthusiasms with as much creativity as they could exercise. Work—productive labor—would be conceived primarily as an opportunity for people to exercise their creative powers. The purpose of work would be to ensure that commonly agreed upon basic needs were met and then to help people to realize their potential. In such a society no one would claim for themselves a right or privilege that was not available to all, and neither would it be possible to inherit power and privilege through the accident of one's birth. It would therefore be impossible for a small minority to amass a disproportionate amount of wealth.

To bring about this kind of society—one that best fosters creativity and compassion—four conditions have to be in place. First,

basic survival needs must be met. This means that construction, agriculture, public utilities, and health care will need to be commonly owned and controlled so that they can be coordinated to produce the goods and services sufficient to meet fundamental survival needs. Socialism is a social, political, and economic arrangement in which the resources available to all are shared equally, rather than being the property of sectional interests. Resources here include all the natural, physical, industrial, and cultural resources, and human properties, talents, and abilities available within a group. For us the exploitation and enjoyment of these resources is a matter for collective democratic deliberation, for a conversation that focuses on how these can best be stewarded for the common good. So socialism establishes some kind of common control over the economic system, so that whatever goods and services are produced are somehow controlled by the whole community or society. This requires some sort of coordinating agency or system of decision making—partly governmental, partly decentralized—to ensure this happens efficiently. Here is the link to participatory democracy through workers’ councils, town meetings, cyberspace communication, and so on.

Second, if people are to decide how best to meet their material needs, what kinds of work will produce what kinds of goods and services, or how to apportion the performance of necessary and unpleasant tasks so that one group or person is not unreasonably burdened with these, decision making mechanisms will need to be in place that everybody perceives as fair. *Fairness* is central to the socialist ideal. This does not mean, by the way, that the same mechanisms will be employed every time we make a decision. The principle underlying fairness in decision making is that those who are most directly affected by a decision should play the major part in making that decision. In these ways socialism is both the ultimate form of participatory democracy—such a long-lionized ideal within adult education—and a movement from an individualist, competitive ethic to a collective ethic that prevents any individual or group from claiming a disproportionate influence in social, economic, cultural, and political spheres of life. It is hard to imagine a better context for the use of the much-invoked concepts of “transformative learning” and “transformative practice” in adult education than in exploring how people learn to manage the transformation of an

individualistic culture into the cooperative and collective ethic of socialism.

Fairness also does not mean that wages are equalized, that all small businesses are eliminated, or that creative entrepreneurship is discouraged. Wages will differ according to the kind of labor involved, its difficulty, the effort it requires, and its social necessity. So, workers whose labor guarantees basic needs—builders, sewage workers, health care providers, garbage collectors, farmers, and so on—will earn more than those who work to produce goods that make life pleasant, even if they are unnecessary to basic survival. Workers willing to undertake tasks that are necessary but unpleasant, and thus avoided by those with the means to do so, would receive higher remuneration. Small businesses that are owned and run cooperatively by individuals, and not large corporations run for the benefit of stockholders, would be actively encouraged.

Once survival needs are met, a third condition comes into play, *creativity*, the chief criterion we employ to decide how our time is best spent, how to organize education, and how work is to be remunerated. The more diverse are our work and educational practices, the more that social arrangements reflect the widest possible range of preferences, and the more that the people's different passions and individual interests are encouraged, then the healthier a society will be. The point of common control of resources to meet basic survival needs is to free people to develop themselves to the fullest in whatever way they see fit, with the proviso that this must not diminish the development of others. So, unlike the stereotypical notion of socialism as bland conformity, a properly socialist system celebrates difference.

And, finally, a democratic socialist society is one in which difference, creativity, and diversity are matched by *inclusion*. Such a society recognizes that people differ firstly in talents, skills, interests, commitments, and physical capability. It further recognizes the importance of identity politics, that people differ by racial group membership, gender, ethnic affiliation, sexual orientation, and cultural tradition. But these differences are not matched by exclusion. A socialist democracy has no place for the "isms" and phobias that diminish us all—racism, classism, ableism, and homophobia. It honors difference and protects the rights of minorities from the potential tyranny of the majority. The minorities that are constrained

are those that seek to accumulate a disproportionate amount of resources for their own exclusive use.

Each of these conditions of democratic socialism suggests any number of practices, and these practices in turn suggest various learning tasks. So the radical practice of adult learning comprises quite simply the learning required to enact these conditions of democratic socialism. Some of this learning will be self-directed, some collective; some will be formally structured, some more serendipitously accomplished; and some will be organized and run by credentialed teachers, some directed by peers, colleagues, and neighbors. In the next sections we explore in a more detailed way how the four conditions of socialism—meeting survival needs, fairness, creativity, and inclusion—each mandate a wide range of learning tasks.

Meeting Survival Needs

Survival needs are notoriously contextual. What one group or person in one place at one time considers necessary for survival differs enormously from how these needs are defined by other groups and individuals in other places and at other times. Given that the resources available to us are not infinite, there will have to be some kind of mechanism in place to judge (a) what comprises basic human needs, and (b) how these needs, once decided, can best be met given the resources available. This immediately suggests a number of learning tasks. People will have to learn about the range of judgments that exist in the society regarding how survival needs are defined, they will have to learn something about the resources available to all to address these needs, and they will have to learn to conceive and enact decision making mechanisms to meet those needs that are perceived as fair. At a very basic level, they will need to learn procedures to decide what needs should be met that allow everyone to feel their viewpoint has been represented in any decision made. We shall have more to say on this question of fairness in a few paragraphs.

For basic survival needs to be met there must be a way for societal resources to be stewarded and deployed in the interests of the majority. This aspect of democratic socialism—exerting common control over the stewardship and deployment of society's

resources—is probably the feature of socialism most commonly expressed in different versions of the idea. The principle of common ownership of the means of production and distribution; the idea that governments should nationalize all major industries and public utilities (health care, transportation, power supplies, telecommunications, education, and so on); the vision of a society based on locally controlled worker cooperatives or agrarian collectives; and the notion of a planned economy with a central agency directing what goods need to be produced and how these should be allocated across the community—all these are variations of the idea of common stewardship of resources for the benefit of all.

Effective majority stewardship mandates many learning tasks. First, we have to learn about different forms of needs assessment, so that decisions about production and deployment can be made that meet people's real needs. Then we need to learn how to create mechanisms of communication—town meetings, factory councils, electronic voting—that allow full and free flow of information throughout society. This is a prerequisite for preventing ossification. Because people's needs and interests constantly change, we must learn how to accommodate and respond to these changes of direction. Learning how to manage resources, how to set up systems of production, and how to match job requirements to the different interests and abilities of individuals are all required for the value of fairness to be realized.

Meeting survival needs also requires that people learn how to organize and administer mechanisms to produce and distribute the goods and services that are necessary to meet these needs. This is a massive educational project. It necessitates studying how communities and societies across history have tried to do this. It means studying how well the fledgling systems people establish to produce goods and services actually perform their task. On the basis of that study, people have to learn how to improve these systems of production and distribution. That, in turn, obviously requires preservice and in-service training to prepare people to run and work within these systems. On a more detailed level, it means a continuous program of research must be put in place that will allow these needs to be met more fully. A guiding principle of this research will be that discovering new resources and new ways to use them will be done with the intention of addressing the widest possible range of needs.

Fairness

The success of any attempt to discover people's basic survival needs, and then to organize production and distribution systems to meet these, will depend not so much on the internal logic of these systems but on whether or not they are perceived as fair. Any system that is perceived as disproportionately benefiting one group or individual will be actively sabotaged, or at best passively endured, by any groups that feel ignored. If a decision is to be perceived as fair, it will need to be trusted as having been reached only after the widest possible consultation and representation, and on the condition that in making that decision the fullest possible information has been taken into account. This is the essence of Habermas' (1996) discourse theory of democracy, and it is why we regard socialism and democracy as intertwined.

As mentioned earlier, we don't regard democracy as only one particular social arrangement; indeed, we believe democracy takes different forms in different situations and to accomplish different ends. The democratic value is one that holds that those affected by decisions are proportionally responsible for making those decisions. The more a practice or policy affects us, the greater should be our say in how that decision plays out. This is why a simple majority vote can be fundamentally unfair. After all, the votes of people far removed from my own problem or situation can always outvote me, even when the decision has no impact on their lives but a major one on mine. This means that decentralized forms of decision making are central to democratic socialism, which, in turn, means people need to be familiar with different kinds of decision-making mechanisms. So a central adult learning task becomes learning different decision-making mechanisms and learning how to judge which kinds of decision making are best suited to particular situations. From very local building, block, and neighborhood decisions to regional matters such as transportation or the location of health care facilities, to society-wide issues regarding educational provision or calculating what amounts of which products are necessary to meet people's basic needs—all these decisions require that people be educated to have full information about the issues they have to decide on and that they learn how to participate fully in decision making.

As already stated, fairness for us means ensuring that no individual or group has greater power or influence over others in a way that is arbitrary. In line with our argument above, we acknowledge that in some situations it is only right that some have more influence over certain situations than others. Knowing about the connection between secondhand smoke inhalation and lung cancer, heart disease and emphysema, I should have a disproportionate amount of influence in requiring you not to smoke in my presence. What we want to avoid is the situation where an arbitrary indicator such as our skin color, social class membership, place of birth, gender, and so on unalterably determines what material benefits we will enjoy in life and gives us the chance to order others around.

Fairness also means that the resources of the planet—both natural and humanly created—be shared equally among its inhabitants. The present situation where certain countries and a small minority of individuals within those countries disproportionately enjoy massive amounts of wealth, and also direct how the majority of resources are to be deployed, is patently unfair. So for fairness to be an organizing value for society, we must institute the collective stewardship of resources already discussed.

Difference and Creativity

From fairness comes our insistence on the recognition of difference. One of the most common and fundamental misunderstandings of fairness is that it imposes uniformity, disallowing individual identities and agendas. The opposite is the truth. Basic fairness recognizes that people are different; they have different talents, different personalities, different interests, and different enthusiasms. They also belong to different groups, and those groups constitute a major part of their identity. Some self-identify by racial group membership, others by sexual preference. Still more self-identify by ethnicity, by culture, by tribe, by commitment to a spiritual creed, or by their being raised in a distinctive town, region, or terrain. A principle of fairness is that one group cannot unduly influence another group to be remade in the first group's image. Basic fairness insists that we recognize that people are different, both as individuals and as distinctive groups. And, recognizing this difference, fairness

requires that ways be found to allow people to claim their identity in ways that are very distinct.

This commitment to recognizing difference in the interests of fairness mandates any number of learning tasks. Indeed, the contemporary emphasis on learning how to recognize and celebrate diversity of all kinds, how to communicate across racial and cultural difference, and on developing forms of antiracist practice can easily be understood as socialist forms of learning necessary to realize the principle of fairness. Fairness requires a good faith commitment of people of very different racial group memberships, ethnic affiliation, and cultural identity to learn to appreciate the different ways members of each group view the world and consider what counts as appropriate action. Fairness also entails learning to live with profound difference, so that the different needs and perceptions of groups can coexist in creative tension. Part of this is learning to be alert to the dangers of the tyranny of the majority. Finally, fairness means, at times, standing up to the agenda and power of a particular group that is attempting to undermine the development of a sense of collective identity or to promote hatred and bigotry. Fairness does not extend to groups who try to exercise their difference and creativity by diminishing the rights of others.

It is important to emphasize that acknowledging difference is not the same as a bland relativism that acknowledges every group's agenda and every person's viewpoint as being equally deserving of acknowledgment and as containing merit on its own terms. That kind of mushy refusal to take a stand plays into the interests of those in power, as Baptiste (2000) so cogently points out. In a society in which democratic socialism has been pilloried as conformist thought control that kills creativity, and in which even discussing a socialist alternative is portrayed as unpatriotic and un-American, anyone who attempts to get people to consider what a socialist economy and democracy looks like will have to fight against some very powerful interests. A skillful ideological manipulation has ensured that socialism is believed to be unworthy of serious attention and believed to be unworkable in the U.S. Allowing that view to go unchallenged—as representing the truth simply because it is expressed by a majority—means a socialist viewpoint will never stand a chance. Therefore, in the interests of fairness, it will be

necessary to force people to pay attention to a socialist agenda. This is what Marcuse (1965) described as liberating tolerance.

We put difference and creativity together because for us the two are inseparable. The reason difference is so celebrated is because of its connection to creativity. The greater the difference we confront, the greater are the possibilities for creativity. Difference makes departures from the norm possible. It helps us envision alternative futures and confronts us with new forms of thinking and living. Difference helps us realize that what we thought was an unchangeable norm is always open to reinvention and re-creation in new ways. Difference encourages new approaches to artistic creation, but it also leads to unique syntheses being made and new connections being drawn. The point of meeting survival needs in a fair way is to create the conditions under which we can live the most unconstrained, free lives possible. Freed from the need to meet basic survival needs, people are able to develop their creative natures in whichever way they see fit.

Inclusion

At the same time as socialism recognizes difference and celebrates people's infinite creative possibilities, it also privileges inclusion. Indeed, the whole premise of socialist thought is based on the notion that those who labor should control the forms and fruits of that labor, whether it is waged or unwaged. Earlier socialist analyses such as those of the Frankfurt School (Brookfield, 2004) focused on the exclusion of the working-class and women from decision-making processes and from the possibility of creative endeavor at work. Capitalism's systematic exploitation was analyzed as producing alienated labor in which the products of people's work were owned and controlled by stockholders and the bourgeoisie. This analysis argued that labor was experienced as degrading and dehumanizing. As societies have become more racially and culturally diverse, as sexual liberation has broken down the silence over sexual identity, and as medical taboos regarding mental illness and physical conditions have receded (though hardly disappeared), contemporary theorizing has broadened its analysis to include other forms of exclusion. Now, it would be highly unusual to read

any exploration of socialism that did not include any condemnation of racism, sexism, homophobia, or ableism.

The socialist argument for inclusion is moral, aesthetic, and utilitarian. Morally, it rests on the democratic principle that those who produce the goods and services that make life better for all should have the chief say in how those goods and services are used and distributed. Morally, too, it places the decisions about what goods and services are to be produced in the hands of labor. Aesthetically, it rests on the notion (also expressed in U.S. pragmatism) that the purpose of life is the experimental pursuit of beautiful consequences. In political terms, this means the pursuit of the fairest possible system for producing and enjoying social goods and services. Additionally, aesthetics mandates the widest possible scope of expressive forms; in social terms, this means creating a system that encompasses the widest possible scope for creative expression. Since creativity is enhanced by contact with multiple traditions, cultural forms, and conceptions of the good life, socialism requires that people be exposed to the widest possible range of influences.

Finally, socialism's justification for inclusion is that exclusion creates differences in power and status that just simply do not work. As one class, race, or gender claims a disproportionate amount of control and enjoys a disproportionate amount of resources, their position of privilege has to be maintained by a complex intersection of ideological manipulation and coercive force (the military, police, penal system, and so on). This is expensive to create and maintain and always destined eventually to fail. It may not fail to the extent of the system collapsing, but it will never ensure smooth, seamless cooperation. Sooner or later, in even the most rigid societies and communities, rebellion, creativity, and dissatisfaction combine to create challenges to and sabotage of the system. The more genuinely socialist the economy, the less a group will feel the resentment that costs so much time and energy for the dominant group to suppress. The more people feel included as partners in decision making and the more they enjoy full and equal access to available resources and services, the more productive and creative they will be. The existence of profit-sharing schemes and worker cooperatives in the most advanced capitalist economies, often in industries where capitalism has failed, recognizes this reality.

For readers who are by now saying “enough of the polemics, get on with it,” we offer the next section. In it we are going to do our best to define, as precisely as we can, what we mean by the radical practice of adult learning.

What Makes Adult Learning Radical?

We use *learning* as both a noun and verb. As a noun it refers to an identifiable change that has occurred in the learner, as a verb to the process that contributes to that change. Let’s take the noun first. From our perspective, radical adult learning is an observable shift in knowledge and skill regarding the creation and maintenance of democratic socialism. From our perspective a single instance of such learning can cross the three learning domains famously identified by Habermas (1979) that have been so influential in adult education—technical, communicative, and emancipatory. For example, learning how to stand up to racist speech and racist acts—including one’s own—involves technical aspects (becoming alert to how certain racist metaphors are used uncritically and instinctively in everyday speech), communicative dimensions (learning how to bring the reality of racism to another’s consciousness so that it is considered seriously and not rejected dismissively), emancipatory processes (integrating an alertness to racism into one’s daily reasoning and practice), and also emotional intelligence (learning to acknowledge yet not be derailed by the frustration, self-doubt, self-disgust, and embarrassment anti-racist work involves, especially for Whites).

But these intrapersonal and interpersonal learning activities are only the beginning. The democratic tradition in the field also requires such individual acts to be tied to political action—to creating structures, systems, parties, and institutions that equalize access to common resources to democratize access to education and health, and to organize around common interests. Learning to recognize and oppose racism—to take the example already mentioned—involves people organizing to enact legislation, create educational programs, establish alternate media networks, set up housing and other cooperatives, and launch neighborhood businesses. This project is pursued on different terrains and using different strategies and tactics. One person might be concerned to

develop an Africentrically grounded adult school in which teaching and learning are in harmony with African-centered values, practices, and conceptual referents. Another might be concerned to set up a “media-watch” to monitor the presence of racist stereotypes in local news reporting. Still another might organize rallies to lobby for the civil rights of undocumented immigrants, for the establishment of neighborhood health centers staffed by native speakers of the language predominantly spoken by community members, or for stronger legal sanctions for clearly racist behavior. Such learning is not just concerned with changing individuals’ perceptions and promoting individual changes of attitude. It is just as much focused on political projects all of which entail adult educational dimensions—people teaching people skills, knowledge, and understanding in collective settings—and all of which are tied together by an interest in extending participatory democracy.

So our understanding of adult learning is not that it is any effort by people over 21 to increase knowledge, enhance understanding, develop insight, or develop skill. For us, adult learning is inextricably tied to creating and extending political and economic democracy—to equalizing control of and access to wealth, education, health care, and creative work, and to promoting collective and cooperative forms of decision making and labor. This is perhaps seen most clearly in community movements. Every act of adult learning in such a movement will entail alternating and intersecting dimensions. None of these activities is wholly technical, communicative, emancipatory, or emotional in terms of the learning that ensues; instead, each involves a complex web of actions, choices, and reasoning, with different forms and processes highlighted more strongly than others at different times.

To create democracy, adults also need to learn about a range of alternative social and economic arrangements: socialist economics, participatory budgeting, worker cooperatives, collective decision making, negotiation strategies, conflict management, and so on. They also need to learn a structural world view, that is, one that sees supposedly individual crises and dilemmas as produced by the intersection of larger structural and systemic forces—particularly the intersection of monopoly capitalism and White supremacy—and one that analyzes the global dimensions that inform the seemingly most mundane local decisions and practices.

Workplace learning is currently one of the most frequently touted projects within adult education. We are also interested in such learning; the workplace is, after all, an important setting in which we exercise creativity and draw aspects of our identity. The stigmatization of unemployment and the shame and self-laceration it produces in those laid off pays eloquent testimony to how meaningful the concept of productive work is for people. But workplace learning does not happen just in waged situations. The unwaged doing motherwork and providing health care for family members, or those doing grassroots organizing or eking out existence while being artistically creative, are also engaged in workplace learning. The workplace, however it is defined, is where many of us develop networks, meet spouses and partners, locate friends, and realize our contribution to society.

From our perspective, then, workplace learning is tied not to enhancing U.S. competitiveness within the global marketplace, but to the creation of more meaningful work—work in which learners feel they are exercising creativity and control, which is regarded as fulfilling as possible and which is undertaken for ends that are seen as inherently important and socially necessary. Establishing the conditions for this kind of meaningful work necessitates a major learning project, that is, learning to recognize and then combat the alienation induced by capitalism. This understanding of adult workplace learning takes us directly to critical social theory's illumination of how the workplace impedes adult learning for creative fulfillment and enhances learning to become efficient consumers of the goods we produce.

For us, Marx's essay on alienated labor (published as one of his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, 1961) is a classic text of adult education. We see it as classic because it illuminates two prominent and disturbing learning tasks of adulthood: first, learning how to accept as normal a life spent working in profoundly alienating conditions, and second, learning how to rationalize away one's disquiet at this. As such, it should be required reading in adult education foundations and introductory or survey classes concerned with examining learning at the workplace.

In "Alienated Labor" Marx describes the way in which work in capitalist society has become objectified, that is, experienced by workers as separated from the exercise of creativity. Identity

development under capitalism is understood by Marx as a process in which “the individual worker sinks to the level of a commodity, and to a most miserable commodity” (Marx, 1961, p. 93). Under monopoly capitalism, the owners of capital can command labor to produce goods that increase the return on the owner’s investment. This produces a hierarchy in which “amassed things, that which is dead, are of superior value to labor, to human powers, to that which is alive” (p. 93). Work under such a system is physically exhausting, mentally debasing, and creatively moribund. Most damningly, it is also spiritually demeaning. Since people work for someone else, their labor becomes converted into someone else’s property. The artifacts produced by people’s labor have nothing of their own creativity or identity contained within them. In Marx’s words “the object produced by labor, its product, now stands opposed to it as an *alien being*, as a *power independent of the producer*. The product of labor is labor which has been embodied in an object and turned into a physical thing; this product is an *objectification* of labor. The performance of work is at the same time its objectification” (Marx, 1961, p. 95, italics in original).

When labor is objectified, something peculiar happens to the worker’s emotions. Workers feel more and more disconnected from their work which itself starts to be thought of as something separate from themselves, something outside their sphere of influence. In a famous quote from the “Alienated Labor” manuscript, Marx writes that “the more the worker expends himself in work, the more powerful becomes the world of objects which he creates in face of himself, the poorer he becomes in his inner life, and the less he belongs to himself” (Marx, 1961, p. 96). In devoting themselves to the production of objects, workers somehow find that their own identity has diminished as the power of the objects they produce has increased. Like the demented ventriloquist who sees his doll gain life and start to control him, so “the worker puts his life into the object, and his life then belongs no longer to himself but to the object (which) sets itself against him as an alien and hostile force” (p. 96). The tragedy of contemporary life is not just that workers are exploited and dominated by the owners of production, but also that they are overwhelmed by the world of objects itself which now becomes experienced “as an alien and hostile world” (p. 99).

It is the recognition that learning can become objectified and experienced by adults as irrelevant to their real needs and inner yearnings that has inspired so many adult educators to insist on the voluntary underpinnings of genuine adult education. From Lindeman (1926) to Horton (1990), a stream of adult educational thought has contended that adult education only happens when adults opt voluntarily for a program of learning that they have helped design. This tradition regards mandatory adult education as an oxymoron, a position often associated in adult education with the work of John Ohliger (Grace and Rocco, 2009). It focuses instead on how adult education can help learners develop skills and knowledge that will help them understand and change the communities in which they live. This learning happens through a collaborative analysis of adults' experiences during which roles of teacher and learner interchange among participants. Adult educators who attempt to follow this tradition do their best to replicate the features of participatory democracy, with all participants actively involved in deciding aspects of what and how to learn.

An Example of the Radical Practice of Adult Learning: Nelson Mandela

One well-chronicled example that illustrates the approach to understanding adult learning we are talking about is the learning project Nelson Mandela undertook to raise an army and conduct a program of sabotage against the military installations of the South African apartheid regime. In his autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994), Mandela describes his life in terms that constantly require learning, in particular, learning to question and change assumptions that had guided his life up to that point. For example, the lack of political progress made in response to the campaign of nonviolence initiated by the African National Congress (ANC) led Mandela to the gradual realization such tactics were increasingly impotent against the government's armed suppression of any dissent exercised by its opponents. In this situation Mandela had to learn to reframe his assumption regarding the tactical effectiveness of nonviolence. This episode of critical reflection led to the formation of the military *Umkhonto we Sizwe* group (Spear of the Nation), whose intent was to attack military installations and transportation links.

Once the campaign of sabotage had been decided upon, Mandela was faced with an enormous adult learning task. From scratch, he had to learn what it took to start an army to carry out this sabotage campaign. He had to learn this, moreover, without ever having been a soldier, fought in a battle, or even fired a gun at an enemy. Since obviously no formal accreditation or training was available to him (unlike the case of the South African military and paramilitary forces), he initiated a massive self-directed learning program to learn “the fundamental principles for starting a revolution . . . what circumstances were appropriate for a guerilla war; how one created, trained, and maintained a guerilla force; how it should be armed; where it gets its supplies—all basic and fundamental questions” (Mandela, 1994, pp. 274–275). The most prominent resource in this self-directed learning project was that of literature. Mandela describes reading the reports issued by Blas Roca (general secretary of the Communist Party in Cuba) about the years the party existed as an illegal organization in Batista Cuba; *Commando* by Deneys Reitz (on the guerilla tactics of Boer generals in the South African Boer War); works on and by Che Guevara, Mao Tse Tung, and Castro; *Red Star Over China* by Edgar Snow on Mao’s campaign; *The Revolt* by Menachem Begin on how to lead an Israeli guerilla force in terrain without mountains or forests (very similar to the landscape of South Africa); books on the struggles of Ethiopia against Mussolini; books on the guerilla armies of Kenya, Algeria, and the Cameroons; and histories of South Africa. He also made a survey of the country’s chief industrial areas and major transportation systems.

As well as the technical kinds of learning outlined above, Mandela had to engage in communicative learning as he sought to persuade his ANC executive committee colleagues and also its rank and file members of the accuracy of his analysis of the situation and his prescription for its alleviation (the movement to armed struggle). He also had to learn to live with the troubling stirrings of his own conscience regarding the neglect of his families of origin and marriage. Mandela writes of grappling with the question “Is politics merely a pretext for shirking one’s responsibilities, an excuse for not being able to provide in the way one wanted?” (p. 181) and facing his constant awareness that neglecting his

family is “my greatest regret, and the most painful aspect of the choice I made” (p. 600). What makes this a particularly appropriate example of adult learning for us is that these learning activities were all framed with the purpose of establishing a genuine social and economic democracy in South Africa. In the tradition of adult education that we are claiming as central to the field, Mandela’s development of tactical skills, political insight, communicative competence, and technical knowledge—all geared towards the realization of democracy—is a quintessential example of adult learning.