Chapter 10
A Critical Theory of Adult and Community Education

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ABSTRACT

Critical theory is one of the most influential theoretical frameworks influencing scholarship within the field of adult and community education. This chapter outlines what constitute the chief elements of critical theory using Horkheimer's (1937/1995) classic essay as a touchstone for this analysis. It argues for a set of adult learning tasks that are embedded in this analysis and that apply both to formal adult education settings and informal learning projects carried out in communities. Future likely trends are the extension of critical theory's unit of analysis to include race, class, gender, disability and sexual identity, and critical analysis of digital technologies.

INTRODUCTION

Adult education across the world has had as one of its chief purposes the creation and maintenance of democracy, both at a societal and community level. Two intellectual traditions underscore this commitment, progressive humanism and critical theory. By far the most commonly discussed and acknowledged of these traditions is progressive humanism. Drawing equally on American pragmatism and humanistic psychology, this tradition enjoins adult education to create conditions for learning that encourage the full flowering of human potential in whatever direction the learner chooses to take that process. Progressive humanism is seen historically in the ideas of Eduard Lindeman and, more recently, Malcolm Knowles.

The second tradition, that of critical theory, has had a significant influence on scholarship and research but been less prominent in influencing practice. This is due to several reasons. First, the theory is avowedly partisan, drawing on Marx's social analysis to explore how capitalism could be replaced with democratic socialism. In the United States Marxist analysis is seen as an alien body of work and it is hard to get practitioners to take it seriously. Second, the language of critical theory is often dense and intimidating, very dif-

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ferent to colloquial language. For a body of theory desired to inspire mass revolution it is ironic that it is so hard to read and understand. Third, there is a lack of work that translates the theoretical concepts of critical theory into practical terms. I first attempted this task in *The Power of Critical Theory* (Brookfield, 2004) and I build on that analysis in this paper to outline the learning tasks that practitioners could support that are embedded in the theory.

BACKGROUND

How does a critical theory differ from other kinds of theories? This is the key question addressed by Max Horkheimer in his classic 1937 essay on "Traditional and Critical Theory" (1995) and his analysis remains pertinent today. Although Horkheimer acknowledges that critical theory contains elements of what he calls traditional (i.e., positivist) theory, there are important differences. The first of these is that critical theory is firmly grounded in a particular political analysis. Hence "critical theory does not have one doctrinal substance today, another tomorrow" (p. 234). This is because its primary unit of analysis – the conflicting relationship between social classes within an economy based on the exchange of commodities – remains stable, at least until society has been radically transformed. A "single existential judgment" (p. 227) is at the heart of critical theory. This is that the commodity exchange economy comprising capitalism will inevitably generate a series of tensions created by the desire of some of the people for emancipation and the wish of others to prevent this desire being realized.

In the commodity exchange economy (an idea borrowed from Marx) the dynamic of exchange – "I give you this, you give me that" in return – determines all human relationships. The exchange value of a thing (what it's worth in monetary terms) overshadows its use value (its value assessed by how it helps satisfy a human need or desire). For example, the exchange value of gold (what people will pay to own a gold necklace) is a socially determined phenomenon that has little to do with its use value (which would be determined by the functions it could be used for, such as producing reliable teeth fillings). The exchange value of learning to read in adulthood (how such learning will help the adult become more successful in the job market) overshadows its use value (how it helps the adult develop self-confidence, draw new meanings from life, and be open to new perspectives on the world). Although the use value of learning is important to adult learners and adult educators, it is primarily the exchange value that policy makers and purse holders consult when determining whether or not programs should be funded and how they should be evaluated.

In the exchange economy goods and products are primarily produced for the profit their exchange value will bring their manufacturers. One important dimension of the exchange economy is the way that inanimate objects and goods become 'fetishized,' to use Marx's term. We start to think that these objects and goods contain some innate financial value or monetary worth that has been magically determined by forces beyond our recognition. Of course this worth does not exist independently inside the product. In reality it is an expression of how much someone is willing to pay for it (in exchange economy terms what goods or money we will exchange to own the product).

In the exchange economy it is not only products and goods that seem to acquire an apparently innate worth (which is really determined by market forces). Our labor – including our intellectual labor of learning and teaching - also becomes an object thought to have some intrinsic value. We exchange labor for money and money for goods, and in the process our labor becomes a thing, a commodity just like the goods we exchange money for. Hence we come to regard our labor power – our ability to work – as if it were a thing existing outside of us, no different in kind from other goods and products. When the objects or commodities we exchange