Introduction

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OUR MOTIVATION IN WRITING THIS TEXT

This particular text emerged, as many others no doubt do, from conversations among colleagues and friends during the exhilaration of conference meetings. All of us had completed major texts (Mezirow, 1991; Hart, 1992; Collins, 1991; Welton, 1991; Plumb, 1989), and it appeared to us that our work had a kind of elective affinity. Our work appeared to occupy a common theoretical space on the North American adult education scene. Though "critical perspectives on adult learning" were making some inroads into the discourse and practice of adult education in North America, we thought that it was the right moment to bring our ideas together in a single volume and to see where we stood with our field and one another. We were also intensely aware that this book, the work of five persons, would not address itself to every important issue pressing in upon us like water from a broken dike. One reviewer, for instance, wondered about the absence of African-American or Hispanic voices. No text can accomplish everything and we admit to certain lacunae. We recognize the complexities of the politics of knowledge and certainly know how contentious debates are about the most fruitful ways to map the intricacies of exploitation and oppression in our late modern world. This text is limited in many ways, given the whiteness of all of its participants. Still, our intention is less than modest. We attempt to grapple with some of the important issues impinging upon all of us as human beings and adult educators respectively. We think it is important to grapple with those systemic forces crushing in upon all of us. We would hope that this text would be accepted as a dialogue partner by those located in many spaces and living out of ever shifting kinds of identity formations.

By bringing five perspectives together, we hoped to accomplish two purposes: (1) to provide serious students of adult education with a reasonably systematic and richly complex treatment of the impact of some critical social theories on adult education thought and research in one volume, and (2) to introduce our thinking to those with an interest in critical social theory but who may not yet be aware of arguments about the centrality of emancipatory adult learning theory to social transfor-

mation and human freedom. Even the "critical pedagogy" literature often associated with Henry Giroux and Peter MacLaren scarcely references any of the critical adult education literature. Educational theory exists in two solitudes as those who write about children and schools remain oblivious to important discussion on the learning of adults. This is quite puzzling, really, particularly when we all know that children do not change the world and that the powerful, formative curricular structures lie outside the walls of the classroom. We are directing this text to serious students of adult education and contemporary society. It is not really a beginner's text; it assumes some familiarity with the Marxian legacy, feminism, and postmodernism, as well as some awareness of central debates within the discipline of adult education. Readers who are steeped in critical social theory, but who are not yet familiar with critical adult education, may find our way of reading social theory provocative,with its implications for an emancipatory learning theory.

To accomplish our goals is not exactly an easy task. For one thing, there is a deep-rooted suspicion of philosophical languages within the field of adult education. Even in a recent special issue of *Studies in Continuing Education*, which was dedicated specifically to examining the theoretical foundations of adult learning, editor Griff Foley expressed his uneasiness, wondering if a serious "dealing with issues" (exploring the meaning of research paradigms, reflexivity, historiography, etc.), courted the "danger of becoming *further* separated from the practitioners and learners whose interests our work supposedly serves" (1993, p. 76; italics mine). There is a danger here, to be sure. It is hard not to feel the sting of those who maintain that social and literary theory in the late modern academy often seems remote from the gritty worlds where we live, move, and have our being. Yet, at the same time, a more serious danger for the study of adult learning lies in the direction of constituting adult education as a "normative discipline" teaching our future practitioners quickly digested and easily formulated principles of program planning and instructional design. All of the authors in this book would argue that adult education as a *field of study* requires space for the free and open inquiry into the nature of adult learning in historical and social contexts. This inquiry must permit the exploration and development of theoretically rich and complex philosophical and social languages. Indeed, academic writing ought to be lucid, simple, aesthetically pleasing. But we must distinguish bad, jargon-ridden writing from bad thinking, and understand that some difficult languages (like those of Adorno, Freire, or Habermas) hold the promise of breaking us out into new ways of seeing

the meaning of adult learning and adult educational practice. Adorno was definitely on to something when he complained that in times when instrumental rationality holds the bit in our mouths the most accessible and comprehensible languages are those that bind us to what is, that press us into the mud of our common-place notions, thoroughly riddled as they are with ideological assumptions about self and world. Still, this will not satisfy everyone; perhaps part of a solution to the theory-practice divide is more serious attention both to *foundational* scholarship and to elaborating *pedagogies* that mediate theory to graduate students, who are, after all, the future leaders within the field. The fear of theory on the part of our graduate students (or general readers) must be confronted head-on, and the reasons for our resistance to particular texts and styles explored courageously. In our dreadful neo-conservative times, the university-based study of adult education is under intense pressure to abandon any kind of critical social theorizing in favour of short-term training programs for whatever "need" panic-stricken governments deem salient. It is also under intense pressure to abandon any coherent approach to the study and practice of adult education, fragmenting into multiple allegiances and specialisms. In the long-run, abandoning deep theory and celebrating the "people's knowledge" uncritically is disastrous for the radical democratic project of adult education. This is so because the longing for the not-yet is, in part, carried by theory itself. I learned that from both Adorno and Marcuse, and it is a lesson well learned for our time. Critical theory, in a very dark time, helps to preserve the sacred trust of human longing for freedom.

A second difficulty facing our project has to do with our dystopic and unsettling world. This particular text has not been written at a high-point in the history of the radical, or critical adult education movement. We are thinking about the future of a critical adult education vision and practice in an increasingly disenchanted world. There can be no doubt that what sociologist Anthony Giddens labels the "tribulations of the [late modern] self" have intensified, even in the last two or three years. The human selfhood is increasingly forced to be reflexive, which, as Jack Mezirow details, unveils learning potential to reflect on taken-for-granted assumptions about one's perspective on the world. But the "reflexive project of the self" must find its way through "numerous contextual happenings," sort out seemingly endless choices about lifestyle, steer its way between "commitment and uncertainty" and construct a "narrative of the self" in a commodified world. However, as the stable routines of life collapse and traditions within the lifeworld erode, the

reflexive self is threatened with meaninglessness and dread (Giddens, 1991, p. 201ff.). In modernity, we dispute the meaning of our lives; postmodern times call into question whether meaning is anything other than our private hunches. Our uncertainty of everyday living plunges us deeper into the depths of our ontological sense of security.

It seems inescapable, to me at any rate, that we are not only confronting in quite dramatic ways the old Weberian theme of the "loss of meaning." We are also threatened by a loss of our own identities as radical intellectuals. Lenin's statues have collapsed, and along with their toppling has gone our own sense of hope. It is not that Soviet-style communism should not have been superseded; it is, rather, that along with communism's collapse in the East and the degradation of social democracy in the West has gone the old dream of a better world. Hope is in very short supply (unless it be, ironically, the hope of making a fortune now that a predatory market economy is in place in Russia, China, and elsewhere).

But, as Italian political theorist Norbert Bobbio astutely observes, "Historical communism has failed. I don't deny it. But the problems remain—those same problems which the communist utopia pointed out and held to be solvable, and which now exist, or very soon will, on a world scale. That is why one would be foolish to rejoice at the defeat and to rub one's hands saying: 'We always said so!' Do people really think that the end of historical communism (I stress the word 'historical') has put an end to poverty and the thirst for justice?" (1992, p. 5). As always, the question: what kind of society do we live in, what kind of society do we wish to promote into the twenty-first century, how will people learn their way towards a more enlightened and more just society? All of us—Mezirow, Hart, Collins, Plumb, and myself—are deeply distressed by the times we are living in and the threat posed to the critical practice of adult education. All of us affirm that viewing the multiple crises of late modern society through the social learning lens illuminates oft-neglected pedagogical dimensions of the struggle for the further democratization of our societies. We do not, however, either agree on all matters or speak with the same accent.

HOW TO READ THIS TEXT

Each of the authors of *In Defense of the Lifeworld* was invited to set out in essay form their central ideas and present preoccupations. This strat-

egy is captured by the subtitle: "Critical Perspectives on Adult Learning," and assumes immediately that, while we are all positioned toward the radical end of the spectrum in North American adult education thought and share a number of common concerns, we have different preoccupations and are at work on different problematics.

From our perspective, the discipline of adult education (adult education is often divided in two—adult education as a field of study and practice) is in serious crisis. The "andragogical consensus" (anchoring the study of adult education in methods of teaching and understanding the individual adult learner), formulated by the custodians of orthodoxy in the American Commission of Professors in the 1950s and solidified by Malcolm Knowles and others in the 1960s and 1970s, has unravelled at the seams. For about a decade and a half, voices from the margins have been levelling four fundamental accusations against the modern practice of adult education: (1) adult education has abandoned its once vital role in fostering democratic social action; (2) the discipline of adult learning was based on a shaky foundation; (3) the contemporary modern practice of adult education is governed by an instrumental rationality that works to the advantage of business, industry, and large-scale organizations; (4) consequently, the guiding principle of the modern practice of adult education, self-directed learning, is conceptually inadequate to serve the interests of the poor, oppressed, and disenfranchised in North American society.

This theme—a discipline in crisis—when linked with its correlative—a commitment to understanding how societal structures and ideational systems hinder and impede the fullest development of humankind's potential to be self-reflective and self-determining historical actors—provides this text with its central *focus.*

The title of the book, *In Defense of the Lifeworld,* has its roots in the imagery of Jürgen Habermas. The lifeworld is the realm of intersubjective interaction and adult learning par excellence. It is within the lifeworld that we learn what life means, what binds us together as human beings and what constitutes an autonomous personality. It is in the lifeworld that we organize our common affairs through non-instrumental forms of communication, even though various traditions provide substance to our meaning perspectives and to our interactions. Critical adult education practice, we argue, has as its normative mandate the preservation of the critically reflective lifeworld (communicative distortions can be sedimented in traditional practices) and the extension of commu-

nicative action into systemic domains; thus the fate of critical adult education is tied to the fate of the lifeworld. Expressed boldly, this formulation—in defense of the lifeworld—holds the promise of replacing the old andragogical paradigm. Readers with interest in Jürgen Habermas will surely find much food for thought in this book!

We all share a common concern to articulate a critical social theory that provides both the philosophical-sociological and normative grounding for our practice as educators of adults. We do, however, have different preoccupations and have been at work over many years on different theoretical problematics. It would seem, then, that some readers will find it useful not only to see how each of the chapters of this book relates to the *central theme* of the text, but also to pursue particular *sub thematics* such as the crisis of the discipline, professionalization, feminism and adult education, the purposes of adult education, the meanings of modernity and postmodernity, the vocation of the teacher of adults, critiques of Human Resource Development (HRD) and so on. Let us now look briefly at some of the preoccupations of each of the authors.

Jack Mezirow locates himself in the social reform tradition within American adult education. Now in his early seventies, with a long history of engagement in various critical and community-based ventures, in the last several years he has been a persistent, even exasperated, critic of the modern practice of American adult education and has confronted his colleagues with pointed criticisms of their narrowed horizons and lapsed memories. Mezirow feels most at home within the American pragmatic intellectual tradition. Readers will note, in the concluding dialogue section of the book, that he distances himself somewhat from the "European" tradition of critical theory. But a close scrutiny of Habermas' work would reveal the significant impact of American thinkers like John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, and Charles Peirce (see, Diggins, 1994, p. 417ff.). It is actually quite tricky to untangle authentically "American," "Canadian," or "British" traditions from those of Europe. Although Mezirow's transformative learning theory continues to be worked and reworked (those who follow Mezirow's work carefully will have a little fun detecting what is new), he has consistently written about the ways people understand their world and the potential available to them to effect social change. He is most at home within the symbolic interactionist theoretical frame (the influence of George Herbert Mead is evident here), and has almost relentlessly pursued the cognitive dimensions of the process whereby adults transform their perspective

on world, self, and others. Mezirow has argued that there is an emancipatory dimension to the developmental, maturational process, and this, like other notions of his, has precipitated spirited debates in the influential journal *Adult Education Quarterly*. Mezirow has insisted that the capacity to reflect critically on taken-for-granted assumptions is the cardinal dimension of adulthood, and he has argued persistently that this social psychological truth provides the grounding for the central task of the adult educator, namely, to foster critical reflection. This key notion provides the bridge for Mezirow to appropriate some elements of Habermas' theory of communicative action. Thus, Mezirow foregrounds the cognitive dimensions of the transformation of the individual's perspective, and the social structural framing of our lives slides into the background. This latter problematic is addressed in the concluding dialogue by myself and Plumb.

Michael Collins situates his work both in the radical tradition of adult education (Hodgkins, Tawney, Lindeman, Horton, Lovett, and Freire) and in a variety of critical theoretic traditions (he has a deep affinity to Habermas' work, but insists on being open to wider Marxian streams—Luxemburg and Gramsci—as well as to elements of phenomenology and pragmatism). Two themes persist throughout Collins' work over several decades. First, he has fiercely criticized the modern practice of adult education for its absorption into the "cult of efficiency" and its adoption of instrumental rationality as its guiding light. Reading Collins allows the reader to see how his commitment to preserve the lifeworld (Collins sometimes uses the Illichian phrase, the "commons," as a synonym) impels him to criticize competency-based approaches to education and to insist that program, or curricular, planning not close off collaborative, dialogic learning processes. Both Collins and myself, particularly, have problematized "professionalization" and the deleterious consequences of "expert cultures" on the lifeworld. Second, Collins has criticized the professionalization of the field (and its attendant dominant ideology, self-directed learning), and this has impelled him to challenge the currently fashionable idea of the adult educator as facilitator. For Collins, the turn to a social learning theory, while important, could distract attention from the importance of the ethical agency of the educator of adults. This strikes me as an important subtheme in the book: defending the lifeworld requires that we find the "courage to teach" (Collins). More than ever, adult educators ought to have something to teach and struggle against the weakening of ethical resolve. But

the question of grounding the discipline of adult learning in the agency of the adult educator remains problematic.

From the early 1980s until the publication of *Working and Educating for Life* in 1992, Mechthild Hart's theoretical work has been informed by two powerful currents of critical thought: Frankfurt critical theory and several varieties of feminism. More recently, and this is reflected in her contribution to this book, she has immersed herself in literature examining racism and her feminist reading has focused primarily on works often associated with the "womanist" stream of feminist thought (Martin, 1994). This latter fact introduces a jangling note into this text as Hart wonders if her perspective is, in fact, marginalized within this text itself! Two themes stand out in the work in the early period. First, she examined how power relations distorted the relations between men and women, and offered us many insights on the learning processes within women's consciousness-raising groups. Second, like Collins, she demonstrated how the Habermasian distinction between communicative and strategic rationalities could help us understand how the organization of work and technology had been structured by an instrumental rationality. This penetrating critique of technology fed into her sharp denunciation of the way a huge segment of the American adult education field had jumped onto the HRD bandwagon. Though not as preoccupied, at least in her writing, with the practice of adult education per se, Hart demonstrated convincingly that a *critical* practice of adult education must be anchored in a socially and historical contextual analysis of specific domains of human interaction (and therefore of learning or anti-learning). This latter preoccupation is manifest in her essay for this book; however, one can see that she is at the moment more concerned with affirming the value of woman's nurturing work as moral-spiritual ground for survival in a terribly debilitating and violent world than she is in elaborating systematic, global theory, so manifest in her earlier work. Nonetheless, Hart is offering us a radical version of the defense of the lifeworld. She draws upon the selective tradition of woman's life-affirming labor to defend vulnerable and oppressed women as well to find a source of resistance to capitalism's incessant exploitation of women everywhere. There is, however, a noticeable shift in her most recent work away from the Habermasian idea (argued by myself) of the unfulfilled project of modernity towards a post-enlightenment positioning in relation to the ideology of progress. Thus, further debate between Plumb and Hart may well prove very fruitful.

Donovan Plumb is a relative newcomer to the North American adult education scene and is the most youthful of all of us. Plumb's central intellectual trait of fearlessness is manifest in his writings to date. In his own way, like Hart, Plumb is a disquieting presence in the current debates about the potential of a critical practice of adult education. In Plumb's earliest work (1989), he brought Habermas and Freire into dialogue, arguing that Freire's pedagogy needed Habermas' theory of communicative competence to place itself on a less shaky, less moralizing ground. Recently, Plumb (1994) has moved onto even more uncomfortable ground. His central project is to place the critical project of adult education in dialogue with postmodernist theorizing. Although he remains convinced that Habermas' theory of communicative action provides a better foundation for critical adult education than Freire provided, he believes that the postmodernist critique of Habermas itself raises questions about the normative foundation for critical theory.

Plumb contends that postmodernist discourses such as the commodification of culture and the undermining of hegemonic domination in favour of surveillance and seduction raise "deep doubts about critical adult education's practices" (1994, p. 2). Though Plumb argues that the critical project of adult education has not exhausted its emancipatory potential, he thinks that we must confront the *sociological* and *cultural* tendencies evident in our time. One of these tendencies is the massive cultural shift away from a discursive, verbal culture to one that is figural. This shift, he argues, pulls the floor out from under the rug of the critical project, based as it has been on Gramscian assumptions regarding the way the dominant class actually dominates subordinate sectors. Plumb's work will help us clarify the vision and theoretical resources we need to move into the twenty-first century. Is the critical project exhausted? Are the modernist, universalist ideals of freedom, justice, and equality preservable? If so, what forces are arraigned against us in our disquietude?

One of my central preoccupations in the last decade or so has been to help shift the way "adult education" has been conceptualized, namely, from an individual, psychologistic focus to one that is socially and historically contextual. Drawing upon the work of Habermas, who has executed the epochal "learning turn" in social theory, I have sought to understand learning as an intersubjective process. I have wanted to find a way of thinking about the various domains of human (adult) interaction as a social learning process. How can we understand the family

and workplace, public life and social movements as learning sites? Toward this end, I have been trying to outline a way of thinking about work and politics that would enable me to understand these domains as collective learning processes.

In my contributions to *In Defense of the Lifeworld*, I attempt to reconstruct the critical theoretical tradition as a social learning theory; I argue that there is an implicit learning theory in the Marxian tradition, and that with Habermas this learning theory becomes explicit. This reading, I contend, has been marginalized in the Habermasian educational literature. In the chapter from which the book title has been taken, I try to anchor critical adult education practice, now deeply threatened by cultural and political-economic developments, in the lifeworld. Picking up on themes present in my earlier work, I choose to use Habermasian role theory as a way of tying critical adult education practice concretely to the constraints and possibilities of contemporary social organization. From time to time, I think of my work as a radical developmentalist approach to learning. Simply, I believe that human individuation requires structures that permit human beings to act autonomously with others toward the creation of a just and equal and free society.

In sum, I hope that readers will find in *In Defense of the Lifeworld* a storehouse of ideas toward the transformation of our thinking and our practices in a dangerous and unnerving time.