

Lifelong Learning and the Pursuit of Happiness: Questioning the Agenda for Adult Education

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Abstract: This paper explores how lifelong learning is connected with the pursuit of happiness, arguing that competing beliefs around what constitutes "happiness" and the "good life" influence the agenda for adult education.

There are many reasons why people engage in adult learning activities, whether it is a careful decision to return to university or the whimsical pursuit of something that captivates one's personal interests, such as participating in an Outward Bound expedition. This paper explores how lifelong learning is linked to the pursuit of happiness and conflicting notions of the "good life." While recognizing the intrinsic, frequently pleasurable aspect of engaging in learning activities, as well as the potential benefits for social and civic engagement, when lifelong learning is linked with the pursuit of happiness, there is danger that adult education can become a more individualized commodity, accessed primarily by elite groups. Using a critical feminist analysis, this paper troubles notions of the good life, challenging educators to think through their underlying philosophical beliefs about adult learning. These beliefs inform how we answer important questions about our teaching practice and raise concerns around the agenda for adult education.

The "Good Life"

As Robert Wolff (2000) notes, "in the tradition of Western thought, it is philosophers who have given the most sustained thought and attention to the search for the good life" (p. 183). Traditionally, questions on conceptualizing the "good life" address attaining a balance between inner harmony and fulfillment for the individual, while considering needs around justice, freedom, and equity for the larger society. These are also concerns that need to be taken up by adult educators.

With the increasing influence of the marketplace, conceptions of the "good life" today are frequently equated with lavish lifestyles. Consumption of experiences (such as spa vacations) or material products (such as the latest electronic toys) are sought after indicators of financial success and social status. Mass production, rapid advances in technology, and the effects of globalization, have made it possible for more people to gain access to these goods and services. Glamorous media productions depict an air brushed reality and an ongoing barrage of advertisements creates endless "needs" to be filled.

At the same time, there is a growing uneasiness around the widening gap between the rich and the poor, and awareness that spiraling consumer demands are increasing environmental degradation. Images of war and terrorism, and devastating natural disasters linked with climatic changes fill our news channels. The focus on active citizenship and rejuvenation of civil society are means by which individuals are collectively working to address these concerns.

In this context, our role as educators is a complicated one, as we strive to help others to attain the "good life". There are frequently tensions between individual aspirations and broader

societal objectives. Questions arise about the basic belief systems that inform our teaching practices, such as what constitutes valuable learning experiences, what is the primary purpose of adult education, and what are the responsibilities of learners and educators?

The History of Happiness

The history of happiness is a complicated one, enmeshed in a multitude of traditions that have emerged in different cultural, religious, and philosophical contexts. In examining the roots of Western thought, McMahon (2006) traces the evolution of happiness, beginning with Greek philosophy. The root words for happiness such as *oblios* and *makarios* mean “blessed” or “fortunate”, while *eudaimonia* refers to a favoured life, in which *eu* is "good" while *daimon* refers to “god”, “spirit”, or “demon”. Initially, then, happiness was perceived as something that was somewhat randomly bestowed by the gods upon select individuals (McMahon, 2006, p. 3).

Over time, however, differing viewpoints on happiness emerged. “For Plato Aristotle, and the Stoics, pleasure was of comparatively little importance in cultivating the good life, which was deemed compatible with significant suffering and sacrifice” (McMahon, 2006, p. 209). The Stoics, for instance, believed that if we restricted our wants, we would be more likely to satisfy them in full. Greek philosophers believed that happiness was to be measured from a full assessment of one's life, rather in passing moments. For example, a man who dies at his prime could be considered happy if he attained all the goals one could reasonably hope for, such as having healthy sons and serving well in battle. Living a long life was not as important as dying at a stage when one's memory would be honoured.

Jewish and Christian beliefs emphasized following the path of God. Often Christianity presented happiness as an eternal reward granted after a harsh existence on earth (i.e. The Beatitudes – blessed are the poor and persecuted). Stories of charity and sacrifice, described in lives of saints, served as examples for others to follow. Conflicting beliefs arose over whether happiness can be attained through free will and conscious choice, or whether it is ultimately, as Saint Augustine argued, “a gift from God,” thus setting a precedent for Calvinist beliefs in predestination (McMahon, 2006, p. 105).

Tensions have always existed between satisfying individual pursuits for personal gratification and serving others because of either religious and/or humanist concerns, as well conflicting ideas around possibilities for worldly and other-worldly happiness. McMahon notes that Christian humanists of the Renaissance believed that humans had the potential to make the world a better place (2006, p. 163). Locke presented the idea that happiness in this world was not so radically different from what one might find in heaven; rather, it could be understood as a kind of continuum. “The gap between perfect happiness and happiness imperfect was not a vast chasm but a natural progression from the pleasures of this world to the pleasures of the next” (McMahon, 2006, p. 186).

It was not until the end of the 17th C. that the word “fun” came into the English language “as a derivation from Middle English *fon*, meaning jester or fool” (McMahon, 2006, p. 199). which connoted a more frivolous approach to happiness. At that time the Vauxhall Gardens, precursors to modern day amusement parks, came into being, as a place one would go for personal amusement. McMahon explains how the focus on happiness gradually became more focused on the enjoyment of earthly pleasures. “To maximize pleasure and minimize pain – in that order- were characteristic Enlightenment concerns” (2006, p. 210).

Throughout history happiness has been linked with privilege—early discourses leave out consideration of women and slaves, reflecting on happiness only as something to be

considered for propertied males. However, in the last couple of centuries, issues of equity have been taken up with the advent of democracy, and the notion that happiness is a “right” for all citizens to pursue.

The Pursuit of Happiness

Along with life and liberty, in the Declaration of Independence, the “pursuit of happiness” is asserted as one of the unalienable rights of American citizens. A decade ago, “The Pursuit of Happiness” was a Canadian pop band, known for clever and provocative lyrics about sex and adolescence. As educators, what does it mean to work towards the pursuit of happiness?

The famous excerpt from the American Declaration of Independence set forth the belief that the pursuit of happiness is not just a privilege, but a right, for all citizens.

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with inalienable right; that among these are life, liberty & the pursuit of happiness.

Of course, as Bertrand Russell (2004, c. 1964) points out, women and people of colour were initially not included within these parameters. Yet the belief that the individual freedom to pursue happiness is one of the fundamental ideals that has shaped Western society. It remains central to the reflections of numerous philosophers over the ages, and to the practices of current day educators.

For example, utilitarianism, a philosophical approach supported by Jeremy Bentham, argues that decisions around actions should be based on the precept that we should try to augment happiness in society for as many people as possible (Wolff, 2000). Tensions arise in balancing the benefits and harm that may befall an individual versus the larger society in making decisions for action.

As educators we can think of numerous situations where the pursuit of happiness creates problems in our different learning contexts. For instance, many individuals will not be as “happy” with their learning experience if they receive a poor mark. Yet as a society we use evaluation to differentiate between strong and weak performances, and it could be argued that the happiness of people who excel or who work harder will be diminished if they are given the same mark as other individuals who do not perform as well. There is often tension in balancing the “happiness” factor between individual and social wants, needs, and desires. In addition, Russell (1996, c. 1930) argues that humans are predisposed to struggle a certain amount for survival. When something comes too easily, it is no longer as satisfying. In the case of evaluation, therefore, if students do not have to exert additional effort to obtain a high mark, they may not value it as much.

At the same time, with the encroaching influence of the marketplace on education, there is a tendency to move towards providing learners with an environment that is tailored to suit their particular expressed needs, wants, and desires. After all, “happy” educational consumers need to be satisfied with their product! But what does this mean for critical and feminist educators who believe that a part of their job is to move students beyond their immediate comfort zone, to challenge them to examine issues that may be difficult to take up, and to address learning in a broader, more holistic context?

Happiness and Lifelong Learning

Many positive attributes are ascribed to lifelong learning. In addition to improved employment opportunities and health benefits, education is expected to address social problems

ranging from alcoholism to suicide prevention. Learning may also be a form of leisure, including recreational activities such as social dance or second language classes. Learning for social change is evident in civil society associations such as environmental groups and peace organizations, and educational strategies are often implemented to address issues of inequality and prejudice, targeting concerns such as racism, sexism, and homophobia. Learning throughout the lifetime is also linked with physical health. For example, increasing women's levels of literacy and education is one of the best ways to improve standards of living in developing countries. People with higher levels of education generally enjoy better physical health. Learning throughout the lifespan is one strategy to improve the health of the elderly, an increasing concern as the population in many Western countries ages.

Thus we can see that in many ways, education is used as a strategy to move towards the "good life" (or at least a better one), although people approach it from a wide range of backgrounds with very different objectives. The challenge for many educators, then, is to assess the underlying value systems that inform their educational practices and shape the current agenda for adult education.

A Critical Feminist Analysis

A critical feminist approach encourages educators to think through the underlying values that inform adult education. Our assumptions about how the world works, and our goals and responsibilities as educators and learners are radically challenged in a world characterized by ongoing change.

In considering the magnitude of problems in the world that force us to question our taken-for-granted assumptions, Habermas discusses the increasing impact of the system (the social, political, economic structures) upon the lifeworld (our everyday existence in homes and communities). "It is only under the pressure of approaching problems that relevant components of such background knowledge are torn out of their unquestioned familiarity and brought to consciousness as something in need of being ascertained" (Habermas, 1987, p. 400).

The increasing support from the corporate sector in adult education has been largely unchallenged by policy makers and administrators—after all, money is money. With the decreasing support of government in higher education funding and the emphasis on lifelong learning as a requisite to be competitive within the globalized economy, the increasing reliance upon private sector funding has gained fairly widespread acceptance. With this shift in values has come a "customer is always right" mentality, whereby universities are targeting educational consumers with customized program options that appeal to corporate sponsors and international markets.

Increasingly, however, alarms are being sounded about the encroaching influence of the marketplace on education, which in Habermasian terms can be understood as the overarching impact of the system on the lifeworld (Gouthro, 2002). Critical educators raise the concerns that education which challenges the status-quo may not be well received in a corporate environment. As Paulo Freire (1998) reminds us "education is a political act. Its non-neutrality demands from educators that they take it on as a political act" (p. 63). Therefore, if we think through the goals of lifelong learning as connected to the pursuit of happiness, we have to consider the need for academic freedom and how this may be detrimentally impacted by the influence of the marketplace. Collins (1995) argues that "If modern adult education practice is to sustain itself as a distinctive field of practice and research, it should embrace forms of teaching and learning, curriculum design and program planning, in which pressing global circumstances are

deliberatively taken into account" (1995). The notion of "deliberative democracy", whereby all citizens have the freedom to participate in decision making processes that impact upon society, is intricately connected to the "right" to pursue happiness.

At the same time education is often a means for personal advancement. The rising costs of higher education are increasingly being born by individuals and by corporations as government support is eroding. Within the context of lifelong learning, the individual pursuit of happiness could include becoming more financially secure and independent, but this is not always as straightforward a motivation as one would assume. In my current Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) funded research project examining women's lifelong learning trajectories, it becomes clear that for many women, the decision to continue their education is associated not only with job development and financial security, but also with self-esteem and personal growth. Women often pursue their own interests in learning only after years of unpaid labour as mothers, caregivers, and homemakers. Some women struggle with coming to a new country and learning a new language. Others have suffered abuse either growing up or as adults that stifled their ability to pursue learning for many years. The opportunity to continue their education is often a step out of a negative cycle, which may provide impetus for them to imagine a different life for themselves. Many women speak about gaining tremendous confidence through continuing their education, and how they believe this sets a positive example for their children and others. For many women it is not the financial gain alone (for indeed, with the high rate of student debt, it is not always clear that education always pays off for older students) but it is attaining a personal goal of achievement that motivates their return to education.

Many critical and feminist educators find that individuals may start out their learning objectives with fairly narrow, market-oriented goals, but given the chance, they may start to think differently. If lifelong learning is presented in a more holistic context, most individuals begin to reflect upon their learning experiences in a more critical way. Learners may begin to challenge what is "practical" learning. For example, learning about diversity may not seem to be as practical initially as other courses. However, we live in an increasingly diverse world and we need to get along with others in society. Considering how we are all impacted by race, class, gender, and other variables, enables us to think more deeply about our place in the world and how we relate to others.

Similarly, the interest of many learners of being involved as active citizens and through civil society organizations indicates that many people are concerned with learning that is connected with broader social goals. The notion of "service-learning" where people engage with learning projects to assist others in developing countries is one form of adult education that can be transformative (although it can also be very troubling and distressful) for learners as they search for learning that is meaningful (Kiely, 2004).

A concern for adult education is that this type of education that is connected with community and broader social goals does not become devalued because of the increasing influence of the marketplace. In addition, there is a need to recognize that valuable learning occurs in many different contexts. Learning traditionally ensconced in lifeworld domains is increasingly encroached upon by the system through "expert" knowledge. Bringing a feminist perspective to critical theory addresses the way that learning connected with the homeplace and caring labour improves the quality of life for many people (Gouthro, 2005). Yet this learning is frequently not recognized because it is not accounted for in the regular global economy. A focus on learning for earning narrows the potential of adult education to take up broader social

concerns, and value contributions from more marginalized members of society. Considering how to create a more holistic perspective on learning would change the way we support learning for more marginalized members of our society. For example, a First Nations woman interviewed in my SSHRC study talked about a university that she attended where there were elders-in-residence to advise Native students as they pursued their more formal academic studies. She found that this was a very helpful support as she learned to cope in what was otherwise a novel and somewhat alien environment.

Implications for Adult Educators and Learners

What does it mean to pursue happiness or attain the good life? As lifelong learning is increasingly commodified in the global marketplace, learning has become more of an individual goal and responsibility. While lifelong learning garners support from most organizations, businesses, and governments, educational initiatives linked with potential financial gain are valued the most. The influence of the marketplace (or the system on the lifeworld) means that frequently lifelong learning and the pursuit of happiness is linked more to helping individuals succeed in attaining an elitist lifestyle than to developing community-based learning initiatives. A critical feminist analysis helps us to explore these complicated concerns around our role as educators and to reflect upon fundamental issues and concerns that inform our teaching practices. As educators we need to realize that our role is to think through and take up with our students these complicated issues as we consider how lifelong learning is connected with the pursuit of happiness.

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