

# **Powerful considerations: The challenge of combining ‘really useful research’ with ‘really critical theories’ in lifelong learning**

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## **Introduction**

In the age of accountability whereby research is treated as a product to be measured and assessed according to its usefulness to practitioners and policy makers, there is a risk that the radical potential for research in lifelong learning and adult education may be undermined. Whilst not devaluing the positive potential of developing linkages between research, policies, and practices (Gouthro, 2007), this paper explores three reasons why educators working from more critical paradigms should question the current research mandates of government, universities, and funding agencies that privileges research linked to evidence-based policies and practices. First, there is a need to challenge neoliberal influences that emphasize individualism, competition, and the marketplace within adult education. Secondly, the increasing pressure for academics to focus on generating revenue through large scale grants and ‘targeted’ research often devalues other kinds of scholarship. Finally, the forms of measurement used to assess accountability are often quantitative in nature, emphasizing numbers over substance, and thereby discouraging academics and students from taking the time to work their way through difficult theory or to develop innovative or radical approaches towards lifelong learning. Each of these points will be taken up, using a critical feminist analysis and drawing upon as my own research studies funded by the Social Science and Humanities Council (SSHRC), to demonstrate the challenge of retaining a critical focus in lifelong learning under existing and developing research paradigms.

## **Neoliberalism**

Historically, critical adult education discourses have pointed out the power inequities that shape learner’s lives. Feminist educators such as Jackson (2003) draw attention to this in their analysis of gender and social class on lifelong learning experiences. Yet neoliberalism decontextualizes the learner as each individual is expected to assume responsibility for his/her own learning trajectory. Each person is expected to make intelligent choices that will have repercussions for individual success within the marketplace, and society as a whole. However, the social structural factors that continue to shape individual experiences, such as gender differences in expectations around unpaid labour and caregiving activities, are not taken into consideration within a neoliberal framework. In my recently completed SSHRC grant on women’s lifelong learning trajectories, it was evident that many women make choices around deferring their education, often

selecting localized, part-time or distance programs, not because it is to their personal benefit to do this, but rather because it 'fits' better around their family responsibilities and obligations. Yet if this means that the woman is then quite a bit older when she graduates and may therefore face age discrimination, or if she does not obtain financial support through student assistanceships because she is taking courses part-time (to accommodate her family schedule), or if she is unable to take the degree that would be most useful to her paid career because it would mean leaving her family to pursue her studies, then these are still framed as 'individual' choices. There is a resistance on the part of many administrators or policy makers to acknowledge women are still disadvantaged in the higher educational system, since decisions are framed as personal choices rather than systemic concerns.

Olssen (2006) notes the increasingly pervasive influence of neoliberalism in lifelong learning contexts is also reflected in the emphasis on competition and marketplace values. Just as students are expected to determine their own learning pathways, similarly, educators are expected to chart their own research trajectories. They do this in a climate of increasing competition enforced by demands for accountability around academic teaching and research, with merit rewards for a few individual research 'stars'. Within an academic environment shaped by neoliberalism, tensions may become heated, particularly when there is a perception that research entails a zero sum equation where your success means my failure. Financial incentives given to individual faculty and to particular institutions based on research 'performance', fuels the flames of competition, undermining opportunities for joint, collaborative ventures.

Smyth and Hatton (2000, p. 157-158) also point out that "the health of our democracy, and hence the possibility that we might affirm a vision for equality and justice, demand a vibrant public sphere" in which the university should play a vital part. Academics should be engaged as 'public intellectuals', not just focused on publishing in their own particularized and specialized niche journals. However, in a neoliberal climate, the rewards and incentives for academics are increasingly linked with individualized success in obtaining high status, peer reviewed publications and receiving funding through external research grants. While these kinds of research activities are important, there is a concern is that other kinds of scholarly activity and engagement may be diminished or discounted in a context that only acknowledges the value of particular kinds of research endeavour.

### **Research Funding**

Increasingly academics are expected to bring in research monies to fund not just their scholarly work, but to support graduate students and contribute to university revenues. Criteria used to assess academic proposals are often linked with the need to demonstrate its 'useful' connections to policy and practice, without sufficiently taking into account the challenges that St. Clair (2004) points out often impede this process, as well as the length of time it actually takes for research to begin to impact upon practices in the field. In his study on literacy

instructors, St. Clair noted that the decisions around research usage were made primarily around two central issues of application and credibility, which essentially meant “what does this research mean for the way I work and how do I know I can trust it?” (p. 234). One of the challenges in research dissemination is that researchers are generally more comfortable with abstract, less specific or readily transferable results, while practitioners often seek particular strategies that they believe can either be implemented in their day to day practices, or evidence that they can use to validate their existing work and to justify a need for funding. In addition, researchers often develop their analysis within a theoretical framework while practitioners are generally mostly concerned with the results or specific practices suggested.

The shift to recent calls for targeted or applied research funding may lead to an emphasis on ‘practicality’ that explores how research can be used to improve educational processes within defined parameters, rather than radically challenging or critically exploring alternative frameworks for learning. In the last couple of months there have been outcries in Canada because of the directional shift of the main funding agency in Social Sciences and Humanities (SSHRC) in giving priority in funding to research connected to the economy. I was recently successful in obtaining a SSHRC grant that will look at connections between lifelong learning, citizenship, and the craft of writing fiction. In writing the proposal I was concerned that this study might be seen as rather radical and not ‘practical’ enough to be funded, but decided to go ahead with it regardless as I thought it was an innovative approach to exploring some of the important questions around citizenship within my country. With the new shift in funding policy, I wonder if research of this kind will be eligible for funding, because it is not explicitly connected to the perceived ‘needs’ of the marketplace.

By overemphasizing what practitioners and policy makers claim to want (simply the results – or rather, results that have been simplified) a more complicated, nuanced understanding of the social processes that shape research results may sometimes be lost. The methods of research are also often linked to the types of questions being investigated. Most feminist research uses qualitative approaches, but colleagues of mine in the US have indicated that it is very difficult to obtain funding for any research unless it uses at least a partial component of quantitative methodology. All of these issues raise concerns around academic freedom and opportunities to engage in critically focused research studies.

In addition, while funding is useful for doing certain kinds of empirical research, those of us who have managed research grants realize the amount of time it also takes to oversee this work. As a consequence, choices have to be made about where time will be spent. Instead of spending hours in contemplative thought or a careful reading of philosophical texts, all too often the researcher finds herself in more of a middle management position. Many years ago C. Wright Mills wryly observed, ‘If one has no staff it is a great deal of trouble; if one does employ a

staff, then the staff is often even more trouble' (2000 cc. 1959, p. 205). While many people who assist on research grants provide invaluable help, I have found too often time gets spent tracking down errors related to expense codes or training new students (who then find a full time job the following week) or revising work that students were supposed to have completed. Mills believed that the emphasis on grant based research in the academic world was creating 'the intellectual administrator and the research technician...[who] now compete with the more usual kinds of professors and scholars' (p. 55). This was a trend that he believed stifled the potential for academic creativity and imagination.

Mills is perhaps a little too dismissive of the valuable empirical research that can be done with research grants, and despite the challenges of working with a primarily student labour force, I do believe that grant based research can provide valuable learning opportunities for faculty to mentor graduate students into the field of research. However, there are some important issues that need to be considered around research funding. When academics do engage in grant based research it is important that there be sufficient institutional supports for this kind of work so that the professor can focus on the academic component of the research rather than the administrative work connected to it. In many universities in Canada, there is enormous pressure, particularly on newer faculty, to bring in grant money if they want to receive tenure and/or promotion. In this case, grants are sometimes being sought because they bring in money and status, not because the researcher necessary wants/requires funding to do the research work. Since there are limited funds available, this often creates a competitive environment that may generate anxiety and hostility. In my recently completed SSHRC grant on women's learning trajectories, I was surprised to learn how intensely competitive the environment seems to be for many graduate students, and increasingly this also seems to be the climate within many academic departments.

### **Assessment**

Current assessment practices rely heavily on quantitative accounting to determine the value of academic contributions. As Ian Martin lamented in his keynote address at SCUTREA 2008, this sometimes results in shoddy scholarship, as individuals simply do not take the time to think seriously and critically about the issues they are addressing. Critical and feminist theories are often more challenging to comprehend than 'popular' or 'practical' adult education literature. A serious engagement with theory requires in-depth scholarly analysis, reflective time, and a willingness to work with complex, abstract ideas that challenge 'taken-for-granted' understandings of everyday learning practices and power relationships. Brookfield (2005) argue that although critical theories may be challenging to work through, they serve many important purposes, including the ability to better understand the social processes in the world around us, helping 'us name or rename aspects of our experience that elude or puzzle us' (p. 5). Instead of remaining focused on our particular problems, through critical theory we may see how our individual circumstances

are linked to broader social, political and political systems. It may help 'us understand not just how the world is but also how it might be changed for the better' (p. 7), thus providing us with 'a form of radical hope that helps us stand against the danger of energy-sapping, radical pessimism' (p. 8).

Yet theory is often not as valued in an information society where ideas are rapidly presented in simplified bullets, where reading is becoming almost a lost art to a generation raised on video games, and where education is increasingly an item of consumption rather than a process of engagement between the student and teacher. Understanding theory requires a significant investment of time and energy, that is often not valued in a world on fast forward.

Within a neoliberal context, Roberts notes that assessment around the 'performance' of academics requires a shift in how research is conceptualized to 'reduce their work to the standardized language of outputs' (2007, p. 358). However, some things are not easily reducible – think of some of the more brilliant academic insights offered by critical theorists, from Nancy Fraser's (1997) notion of 'subaltern publics' to Habermas's (1987) framework of the 'system/lifeworld' divide, to Freire's (1970) explanation of 'banking education'. You could develop some sort of statistical output to list all the people who have cited these ideas, but that would not begin to capture the significance of these intellectual insights. In fact, a numerical assessment of citations diminishes a richer understanding of the impact of these concepts on the fields of adult education/lifelong learning.

Similarly, Roberts (2007) believes that many of the intangible and less quantifiable aspects of research are lost in this kind of statistical accounting system. The development of collegial relationships with other academics, the richness of the mentoring process for new scholars, the satisfaction of forging beneficial ties with community groups are all difficult to display on a numerical score sheet. Roberts argues that 'by reducing research activities to discrete measurable units, much of the most important work undertaken by researchers is ignored' (p. 358). The consequence of this, he believes, like Mills argued many decades ago, is that other important aspects of research are lost. 'Production matters more, and indeed comes to *stand in for* creativity, critical thought and collegiality' (2007, p. 359).

### **Critical feminist analysis**

Critical feminist theory points to the implicit power issues that exist in any educational context. Decisions around what kind of research will be funded, rewarded, and acknowledged are political decisions that have repercussions for the future of adult education and lifelong learning. One of the challenges created by a neoliberal context is that critical and feminist research may be sidelined. As well, Plumb, Leverman, and McGray (2007) note that in this context, learning becomes an individualized activity whereby the educational expert transmits knowledge that is deemed necessary for success to the learner. Like Freire's

(1970) notion of 'banking education', learners are not encouraged to radically question what they are told, but rather to accept the information that is given to them. The only difference is that in a neoliberal context supposedly the learners are the ones making the choices as to what they want to learn (thus proving themselves to be wise consumers). However, education is not perceived to be a mutually constructive or constituted process, nor is it meant to challenge the status quo. It is a means of being successful within the existing system rather than a way of exploring alternative or radical social changes.

Increasingly curriculum and the research that informs its development may be focused on the needs of the marketplace. Habermas (1987) believes that the rise of market economy has seen the development of system structures that often impact detrimentally on lifeworld contexts, by overtaking opportunities for dialogue and exchange of ideas through a process of colonization of the lifeworld by the system. Through the development of civil society, Habermas (1996) believes that we can develop democratic learning opportunities to challenge this trend. Collectively, people can engage in dialogue to explore alternative perspectives and frameworks for thinking, as well as engage in action to address social justice and equity concerns. Smyth and Hattan note that 'the terrain of education and training...sits somewhere between the market, the state and civil society, and as such, its social location is a significant site of colonization and contestation' (2000, p. 160). This is evident in the pervasive influence of the marketplace in creating a research and learning culture characterized by individualization and competition with a primary focus on economic concerns. They believe that it is essential that educators cultivate democratic learning opportunities to resist the overarching influence of neoliberalism, and for academics to critically take up the role of the 'public intellectual'. One area of resistance that they note is that when given funding to do research on public policy, researchers should take advantage of this opportunity to bring in a more critical lens.

Similarly, feminists and other educators committed to issues of inclusions, social justice and equity need to continue to draw attention, as Jackson (2003) does, to structural issues such as gender and social class that impact on the ability of learners to participate equitably in lifelong learning contexts. This continued criticism is needed to challenge the individualization of a neoliberal context that dismisses or overlooks the need to create policies, programs and supports for learners who are socially disadvantaged. Both critical and feminist researchers also need to insist upon the value of using theory as an integral component of their work, resisting the urge to continually simplify and quantify their analyses so that they are reduced to scholarly 'outputs'. Academics need to assert the importance of research that focuses on concerns beyond economic productivity, to take into account the importance of learning that occurs in all realms, including the homeplace and community based contexts.

## Implications

Within a neoliberal context there is less support for alternative research strategies such as community/university based projects. Research not connected to the workplace but to other kinds of learning may not be as well supported. Time spent developing theoretical work is not as highly valued, and many academics find themselves focusing on getting peer reviewed publications and external grants, more to advance (or survive!) within the academic realm, than because it is work that they find critically engaging. Feminist, antiracist work, and other research on inclusion issues (ie. GLBTQ) often does not receive as much attention or obtain as many citations as other kinds of research, so there may be less willingness for academics to pursue these topics. The emphasis on funding research that is linked to evidence based results to inform policies and practices constrains a broader and more holistic approach to academic inquiry.

Rather than focusing primarily on individual career success, educators need to question the constraints of existing research mandates that stifle the potential for emancipatory opportunities in lifelong learning. In a world rife with violence, environmental problems, and a current economic crisis, educators need to be able to develop critical assessments of power, inequality, and strategies to work towards social justice. In doing so, they must draw upon 'really critical theories' to ask who benefits from current definitions of 'really useful research'.

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