

THEORIZING A COALITION-ENGENDERED EDUCATION: THE CASE OF THE BOSTON WOMEN'S HEALTH BOOK COLLECTIVE'S BODY EDUCATION

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Concurring with Cunningham's assessment of the need for a counterhegemonic vision of critical pedagogy in adult education thought and practice, this article theorizes a coalition-engendered education as a specific type of emancipatory pedagogy common in North America. Examining the Boston Women's Health Book Collective's body education as an exemplar of coalition-engendered education, this article compares and contrasts coalition-engendered education with the more familiar Freirean critical pedagogy, drawing important implications for both the theory and practice of adult education.

Keywords: *critical pedagogy; conscientization; health care; nonformal education; activist education*

Trends over the past 40 years indicate that the workplace is now the primary driving factor in the field of adult education. Work-related learning, whether undertaken to enter the job market, upgrade skills, change careers, or meet certification and licensure requirements, accounts for more than 80% of adult education (Rachal, 1989). Although the world of work always played a role in the field, workplace education through the early decades of the 20th century slanted toward a liberal and/or self-help direction that emphasized the cultural uplift of work rather than a focus on training.

Adult education scholars worry that the institutionalization of the field has created at least two important theoretical and practical problems. First, as the values of government and industry are increasingly injected into adult education, the field socializes individuals into the market-based system and into the culture of specific occupations (Merriam & Brockett, 1997). Thus, despite theories propounding the distinctiveness of adult education, in practice the field has become increasingly like

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schooling, which reproduces existing social, cultural, and economic relationships (Merriam & Brockett, 1997). Second, when adult education, a historically broad field, is reduced to a work-related phenomenon, both the goals and the means of achieving them become reductionistic, aligned primarily with efficient and effective production (Cunningham, 1992). Moreover, many educators have argued that these trends have made adult education into nothing more than the servant of industry, training human capital for increased motivation and productivity (Ilsley, 1990; Watkins, 1989).

TAKING CUNNINGHAM SERIOUSLY

Phyllis Cunningham has pleaded for a new vision that breaks away the ideals of technology and production of material goods to develop a counterhegemonic vision for adult education: a North American equivalent to Paulo Freire's literacy work in South America (Cunningham, 1992). Cunningham maintains that understanding the richness of emancipatory pedagogical encounters that are grounded in the economic, social, and political forces of their time underscores the one-dimensional nature of contemporary adult educational practice and can lead scholars and practitioners into new insights.

I agree with these scholars' critiques of the "bottom-line" mentality that is increasingly pervading the field of adult education, as well as the need for studying multidimensional emancipatory educational projects. In this article, I suggest that one area of focus, heretofore largely ignored by adult educators, is the category of nonformal educational projects that develop in certain activist groups composing what I call "coalition-engendered" education. I will argue that grasping both the depth and subtlety of these coalition-engendered endeavors can serve as a powerful antidote for one-dimensional thinking in adult education. Furthermore, I maintain that these projects, many of which have profoundly affected North American society, are indeed equivalents to Paulo Freire's celebrated literacy work in South America.

How might a coalition-engendered educational project come into existence? What would it look like? Who would be part of it? Consider for a moment a group of adults who are on the margins of an institution and who, for some reason, find it necessary to learn things that the dominant social or professional culture has withheld from them. If the dominant culture has withheld, silenced, denigrated, or trivialized information, there will be no ready-made curriculum. Furthermore, it is entirely likely that there may be no educator with either the expertise or interest to fill the role of leader, teacher, or facilitator. In such social contexts, if the learners are going to learn they must investigate and compile their own curriculum, develop their own activities, and become one another's teachers. The teaching role in these coalition-engendered projects does not rest upon any one individual or group of individuals, but diffuses into the group as a whole.

To put a face on coalition-engendered education and to demonstrate how such education has and could operate, I will focus on one exemplar: the Boston Women's Health Book Collective (BWHBC). Within women's health care reform, widely considered to have been the most effective area of the "second wave" women's movement in the United States, the work of the BWHBC has been praised as the single most important project in the last half of the 20th century (Schneir, 1994). The high regard accorded the BWHBC has been well deserved, for this group's work has directly and indirectly changed the lives of millions of North American women. The BWHBC is best known for the publication of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, which provided information for women about their bodies that was available nowhere else. Thirty-plus years later, when the evening news runs features on mammograms and women give birth on the Discovery Channel, it is easy to forget how radical *Our Bodies, Ourselves* was three decades ago. But when the BWHBC wrote frankly about sexual intercourse, pregnancy, childbirth, and even lesbianism in 1970, it revolutionized women's feelings about their bodies, their sexuality, and their relationships with the men and women in their lives.

The BWHBC's influential book has provided educational opportunities for millions of women. Their work for social, political, and administrative changes in health care has touched the lives of countless more. From the standpoint of emancipatory pedagogy, however, it is their own coalition-engendered education that is the most compelling.

METHOD

This article is a conceptual analysis of the education of the women of the BWHBC, an education that they called "liberating" and "life changing." For this analysis, I draw upon their descriptions of both what and how they learned that are contained in the first nationally published edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (BWHBC, 1973). Comparing and contrasting the values, approaches, and methods of what the BWHBC called their "body education" with the more familiar Freirean emancipatory pedagogy, I theorize the notion of coalition-engendered emancipatory education, a peculiarly North American type of nonformal education.

My method for studying these autobiographical accounts is based on the textual analysis model that has grown out of ongoing scholarly research conducted by numerous philosophers of education, a model first used to study fiction and later applied to biography and autobiography. For instance, philosopher of education Jane Roland Martin (1985) undertook a persuasive gender analysis based on Richard Rodriguez's (1982) autobiography, *Hunger for Memory*. Karen Maloney has used both the life and work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman in her conceptual research and, with Connie Titone (1999), has compiled the book *Thinking Through Our Mothers: Women's Philosophies of Education*, which finds similar conceptual themes from the biographies of seven women in education. Susan Laird (1993) has

drawn upon autobiographical writings by May Sarton and Alice Koller to theorize about curriculum concerning single life for women; Deanne Bogdan (1992) has constructed her feminist theorizing about literature education around autobiographical narratives of her own classroom teaching. Madeleine Grumet (1988) and Jo Anne Pagano (1990) pioneered a feminist genre of curriculum theory grounded in autobiographical reflection, and Susan Douglas Franzosa (1992, 1998) has conceived educational autobiography itself as a form of theorizing in which she and Laird, along with Wendy Kohli and other contemporary feminist educational theorists, have also engaged. Thus, textual analysis using autobiographical narrative as primary source material for analysis is an increasingly common conceptual tool for philosophers of education.

I am cognizant that in turning to the autobiographical accounts of the BWHBC contained in *Our Bodies, Ourselves* I am not finding all the information that exists about the BWHBC's work. Thus, I am consciously avoiding the modernist mistake of assuming that I am utilizing all the materials that could be used. Rather, their accounts provide a snapshot of their reflections shortly after their coalition-engendered emancipatory education began. These autobiographical accounts are necessarily partial, just as Freire's (1994) accounts of his literacy work in, for instance, *Education for Critical Consciousness* are partial. My purpose in this article, however, is not to verify or challenge the claims that the BWHBC or Freire made for themselves but to conceptualize the BWHBC's autobiographical accounts in more familiar Freirean language, which allows for fleshing out the conceptual differences between the two and explicating how those differences define the nonformal education that I refer to as *coalition engendered*.

Therefore, in what follows I will use the BWHBC as an exemplar of coalition-engendered emancipatory education to describe how the characteristics of this sort of nonformal education create a different species of adult education than one sees in formal institutions. Taking seriously Cunningham's plea for adult educators to develop a counterhegemonic vision for adult education, I argue that this analysis underscores the richness and multidimensionality of an educational practice that develops outside of formal adult education venues. Finally, I will conclude with numerous important implications for both the ongoing practice and the research of adult education.

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT

The health care "system" in the 1960s was a purely euphemistic term. It was actually a sprawling array of disconnected hospitals, clinics, health plans, and insurance companies (Starr, 1982). Yet, this industry was experiencing unparalleled growth, fueled by skyrocketing patient costs, rapid proliferation of health insurance, and, in 1965, passage of the Medicaid and Medicare Acts (BWHBC, 1973).

Despite the billions of dollars streaming into health care, the United States compared poorly with many other Western nations in basic health statistics (BWHBC,

1973). Women's professional presence was felt little in medicine because as a group, women were limited almost exclusively to nursing and relatively low-level positions. Medical doctors were overwhelmingly male and White (BWHBC, 1973).

Abuses were rampant, affecting women in disproportionately high numbers. One study found that less than one third of the hysterectomies performed in a community hospital were medically justified (BWHBC, 1973). Journalists reported that operations resulting in sterility were performed routinely on African American and Hispanic women unbeknownst to them. There were multiple instances in which people of color were chosen as experimental populations without their knowledge (Starr, 1982), including a graphic situation in Texas in which 78 Chicano women were given birth control pill placebos (BWHBC, 1973).

Huge state- and community-funded programs promoted birth control in U.S. ghettos, but such information was extremely restricted in White communities. Although *married* White women across the country did receive prescriptions for birth control, many left their doctors' offices with methods of birth control they had not chosen and that they were not absolutely sure how to use. All too frequently, the net effect was unwanted pregnancy.

During this period, U.S. physicians claimed for themselves unusually broad powers. Physicians were the sole authority in deciding which patients were treated and where, the cost of the treatment, who would be admitted to which hospital, what treatment was given for how long, which drugs were administered and in what quantities, and what surgeries would be performed. The American Medical Association, into which physicians poured money, jealously guarded the physician's role as the exclusive access route for health care services (Starr, 1982).

THE LEARNERS

The women of the BWHBC had attended college, but they were not doctors, nurses, scholars, researchers, or activists. Most of them had abandoned careers to become wives and mothers. The conflation of the sexual revolution, with its expectation of sex on demand, the media's romance with romance, and the numerous institutions eager to define the "ideal woman" had left them feeling alienated and ashamed of their own bodies. Some of them did not even know the names of the parts of their anatomy (BWHBC, 1973).

Throughout their lives, they had been taught that their needs and desires were dependent upon, and secondary to, those of the men in their lives. Having been well schooled in the notion that "biology is destiny," a sense of inferiority was universal among them. They acted, and were treated, as objects (BWHBC, 1973).

In the spring of 1969, all of this began to change. The women who were later to become the members of the BWHBC met one another at a women's conference in Boston in a small group discussion on "women and their bodies." They revealed to one another their frustration and anger about the paternalistic, condescending, and

noninformative attitudes of their physicians (BWHBC, 1973). In the discussion that followed, they realized just how deficient they were in understanding basic physiology and medical terminology.

Several of the women agreed to work on a summer project: They would research topics particularly pertinent to learning about their bodies and share in the group what they learned. They wanted to become familiar with some medical terms and the functioning of the female body. The women agreed to write papers individually or in small groups, then present the results in the fall to other women (BWHBC, 1973).

The stage was set to begin their coalition-engendered education.

THE ADULT CURRICULUM

When Paulo Freire (1994) and his compatriots taught reading and writing to illiterate peasants in Brazil, they developed learning activities based on a combination of codification, or authentic abstraction, and generative words. Freire (1994) defined *inauthentic* abstraction as learning content based on syllables, words, and phrases that were either meaningless or insignificant, having nothing to do with the learners' life experiences. Freire chose an *authentic* abstraction, using what he called "generative words." These words were chosen for their syllabic richness, as well as their thematic and emotional connection to the peasants' lives.

In the classes, Freire used photographs and sketches of the learners' actual surroundings, which Freire called "codifications." These codifications depicted peasants plowing fields, the shacks in which they lived, and grandiose homes of the estates' masters. Codifications allowed the learners to gain enough distance from their daily lives to be able to reflect critically on their real-life situations and to compare their reality with that of the landed master (Freire, 1994).

The BWHBC's curriculum shares many similarities with that developed by Freire, but it diverges in significant ways. Perhaps most obviously, the women had no educator in charge of selecting the topic of study or developing the learning activities. They made these decisions collaboratively. Furthermore, the women of the BWHBC gathered their own curricular content.

The members of the BWHBC began their curriculum development by researching medical terminology and physiology from a wide variety of professional sources, especially medical and nursing journals and textbooks. They wrote reports from their research and shared with one another the information they had learned, accompanied by pictures and diagrams from medical texts. Then they discussed their personal experiences and perceptions about what was presented in the professional materials (BWHBC, 1973).

Just as Freire (1994) used generative words laden with emotional significance for the peasants, the women of the BWHBC began with two of their own emotionally laden generative words: sexuality and pregnancy (Birden, 2002). Tied into a

cycle of pregnancy, birth, lactation, and child rearing, they knew that freedom of choice in this aspect of their lives was crucial (BWHBC, 1973). They soon discovered that this was also the sort of information that was the most difficult to come by. Taboos were still strong. The medical culture held a tight rein on knowledge. Thus, much of the information that the women believed was in their best interest to know was systematically withheld.

From the outset, the BWHBC learned from texts never intended for them, using methods of their own design. They privileged their personal experiences and perceptions equally with the scientific facts they learned from the medical literature (BWHBC, 1973). The medical texts, then, became a vehicle for dialogue, an opportunity to compare and contrast their collective experience with published information. In this respect, each group member's personal experience actually became part of the BWHBC's curriculum, and they developed a foundation of collective experience upon which to base future assessments. That is, their discussions illuminated experiential "facts" that the medical texts had failed to mention or that were trivialized or denigrated. Their dialogue elicited experiential knowledge that affected the meaning of medical facts. In this "body education," as they called it, just as with Freire's literacy project, intellectualized content became contextualized through dialogue, making their learning grounded, specific, and concrete.

THE TEACHING-LEARNING AND LEARNING-TEACHING

It is in the BWHBC's teaching and learning that their coalition-engendered education diverges most sharply from familiar Freirean pedagogy. The substantive differences relate primarily to the diffusion of the teaching function in the coalition-engendered education in which the whole group is the peer-teacher of the individuals within the group. On the other hand, the striking similarities between the two types involve three well-known Freirean values: dialogical creation, conscientization, and praxis.

Freirean Teaching-Learning

Freire (1985) believed that only a curriculum based on a dialogic approach could possibly interweave content and process in a way that would release the learners into creative acts of learning. He wanted to teach reading in such a way that students would develop the impatience and vivacity that characterize search and invention. Therefore, Freire argued that creation must take place at two levels (Freire, 1985, 1994). First, emancipatory pedagogy must be re-created again and again, not transplanted. Freire claimed that it made little difference whether an educator was transplanting one of his methods or a method developed by the bourgeois establishment; both kinds of superimposed solutions would be doomed to failure because of their inauthenticity. Second, Freire reasoned that learners must assume

the role of creative subjects from the very beginning. Using generative words, the learners immediately began to combine syllables to create their own words.

However, Freire was adamant that reading and writing alone would not create liberation. Understanding the written words must be achieved not prior to, but simultaneously with, "conscientization." Conscientization Freire (1985) defined as a developmental process by which people move out of naiveté into critical consciousness. It means that individuals who have been submerged in their realities, merely feeling their needs, are able to step back and look objectively at the structures and processes that are the causes of their needs. Without conscientization, people are carried along by change that is initiated by more powerful others. They are dominated by the forces of myths and traditions and manipulated by organized advertising and ideology. An emancipatory pedagogy, then, requires that the teaching encourage the learners' ability to perceive the structural significance of the changes that up to this point they have felt rather than understood. Grasping the structural realities in which they are immersed, they must begin to understand themselves as part of an oppressed group, the first step in working toward emancipation.

Finally, Freire was clear that critical consciousness cannot be attained via intellectual effort alone. Freirean pedagogy always emphasizes praxis: free, creative engagement in the world, whereby the individual both changes the world and is likewise changed through the experience of working for change. He espoused a crucial dialectic between coming to know an unjust reality and transforming that reality. Simply unveiling injustice does not guarantee its transformation. Emancipatory pedagogy's intent, then, is at once practical and theoretical: people understand in order to intervene, and by intervening they understand differently.

The BWHBC's Teaching-Learning

When the women of the BWHBC began their coalition-engendered education, Freire's work had not yet been translated into English. The women did not have an articulated theoretical approach for which they would seek a correspondent teaching-learning practice because they were learners as well as their own teachers. For example, their choice of dialogical learning was not based on a theoretical position but an aversion to what they called "rote memorization" (BWHBC, 1973, p. 3). They landed upon dialogical learning because it corresponded to their needs for intimacy with one another and with the content of their learning.

Moreover, Freirean emphasis on the need for creativity among both teachers and learners was evident in the BWHBC's coalition-engendered education from the start. The BWHBC's creativity was not an educational design choice; it was based on necessity. The information they needed was not available unless they were willing and able to investigate unfamiliar texts, compile content, and create learning activities.

The BWHBC's dialogical approach to learning scientific information emboldened them. They gained faith in their abilities to learn, to understand complex information. More crucial, however, their dialogical method provided a mechanism for moving from a riveted and noncritical fixation upon their problems with physicians to an understanding of how that personal experience was situated within their collective experience. Their decision to privilege collective experience along with scientific facts led the women to an increasingly critical attitude toward what they were learning. They began to doubt the veracity of some medical facts that were at odds with their collective experience. They were moving into conscientization.

They found reams of moralistic counsel that was being taught as science. Some medical school textbooks suggested that physicians assess the female patient as to her "femininity quotient" (BWHBC, 1973, p. 249). Obstetrics textbooks counseled that a woman's "strong need" for emotional dependency on her obstetrician is "healthy and therapeutically useful" (p. 251). As the BWHBC began the process of distinguishing between scientific evidence and professional opinions presented as fact, they discerned that such counsel was designed for physician comfort and convenience and then disguised as therapy. Adequate health care, the BWHBC surmised, meant both access *to* health care and protection *from* health care (BWHBC, 1973).

As long as the women remained riveted on individual frustrations and problems, they were victims. Situated in the group, however, they were able to see emerging patterns. In the words of Marilyn Frye (1983), they began to recognize their oppression *as* oppression. Frye argues that oppressed people's lives are confined and shaped by forces and barriers that are not accidental or occasional, and hence avoidable, but are systematically related to each other in such a way as to catch one between and among them and restrict or penalize motion in any direction. The oppressed are caged in. Using Frye's analogy, if one myopically focuses on just one wire in a birdcage, the other wires are not visible. It is only when one steps back, stops looking at the wires one by one, microscopically, and takes a macroscopic view of the whole cage that one can see that the bird is surrounded by a network of systematically related barriers (Frye, 1983).

When the women of the BWHBC began to see themselves as part of a group systematically controlled by complex power structures, they had moved from an individual perspective to a group perspective to a macroscopic perspective, or what Freire would have called a structural perspective. Furthermore, they began to understand how their actions helped re-create and sustain this systematic oppression. They reasoned that taking different actions would change their situations. Thus, they began the development of praxis.

A summer's learning project that began with such modest aims ended with a radical change in perspective that reads like a conversion experience. They exclaimed that their body education had been "liberating," "life changing," and that their new knowledge had overflowed into every area of their lives (BWHBC, 1973, p. 2).

When they began their research, they merely wanted to do something about their personal interactions with their physicians. By the end of the summer, they wanted to change their worlds.

THEORIZING A COALITION-ENGENDERED EMANCIPATORY EDUCATION

For education to be emancipatory, Freire contended that it must (a) seek to understand epochal societal changes; (b) authentically abstract the structural realities in which persons are immersed; (c) critically reflect on real-life situations; (d) provide a nonmechanistic approach to learning that allows for creativity of learners and teachers; (e) work toward conscientization; and (f) develop praxis by which learners will seek to transform the world, even as they are changed by the transformation process. As has been shown in the foregoing discussion, the BWHBC's coalition-engendered project meets Freire's own criteria for emancipatory education.

That said, however, coalition-engendered education is also quite distinct from Freire's critical pedagogy. First, Freire was adamant that conscientization must be achieved simultaneously with understanding the written word. Obviously, the BWHBC's previous literacy was a basic skill upon which their ability to engender their own education depended. The fact that their earlier learning had not been liberatory did not rule out the possibility that their ability to read could enable them to engage in emancipatory educative activities. The BWHBC's coalition-engendered experience suggests that literacy may often be basic to later emancipatory learning. The logic of the BWHBC's case offers a conceptually crucial insight for educators of literate adults who are nonetheless oppressed.

Second, the engendering process that occurs during coalition-engendered education builds into the learning complex skills not necessarily needed in Freirean critical pedagogy. Because there was no designated adult educator, the group as a whole was responsible for cultivating the climate, developing the methods, shaping the dialogical process, fostering intimacy and connection, and nurturing a sense of belonging. Therefore, the coalition that engenders its own learning must become adept at collaboratively listening, drawing out, affirming, explaining, comparing, contrasting, corroborating, and elaborating. The coalition, then, not only appreciates but also appropriates the experiential base of the collective as a whole.

It is this diffusion of the teaching function in coalition-engendered education that most distinguishes it from Freirean emancipatory pedagogy. The teacher, who on first glance appears to be missing, is present as the whole group guides, facilitates, and acts as teacher-learner to the individuals of the group. That perceived "lack" becomes the strength of coalition-engendered education. Coalition members that are responsible for their own teaching, learning, and curriculum development become different people than when much of that work is the responsibility of a single educator. Indeed, as the term suggests, a coalition that engenders its own

education births, creates, brings into being its own education that was in them, of them, and for them in a way that could only be possible in the intense, and often chaotic, collaboration of coalition-engendered education. Utilizing an educator who does part of this work for a group would necessarily distance the coalition from the engendering process, diluting the creative process, and hence, the embodiment of learning.

As a result, coalition-engendered education is of necessity a radically democratic project. When learners must be cocreators of their education in such voluntary associations, all learners must be taken seriously or they will leave. The content, approach, and subject matter can vary, but coalition-engendered projects must find a way to value inventiveness and democracy and to concretize both through content and method.

It is important to recognize that although one criterion for coalition-engendered education is its members' praxis, it may be the case more often than not that the learners first come together lacking this aim. Certainly that was the case with the BWHBC members. Nor did Freire expect the peasants to arrive in his classroom prepared for praxis. In Freirean critical pedagogy, the learners-teachers arrive with the aim of learning, not changing their worlds. It is the teacher-learner in Freirean pedagogy who comes to the educational environment with conscientization and praxis on the agenda. The teacher-learner then develops learning strategies that make conscientization possible.

The Freirean preordained agenda does not exist in coalition-engendered education. Rather, the dialogical process engenders conscientization, which in turn prompts a desire for praxis. Thus, in the case of the BWHBC, the thought of making political and structural changes in health care evolved as the learners engendered their education. They did not arrive with the hope of changing society and then find learning methods to fulfill this need. That said, because no adult educator sets an emancipatory agenda for learning in coalition-engendered projects, these emancipatory educational endeavors are often recognizable as such only retrospectively.

Another element in coalition-engendered education that is frequently different from Freirean critical pedagogy concerns Freire's contention that only the oppressed can work for their freedom. Although this was the case with the BWHBC, in other coalition-engendered projects individuals may work against the oppression of others. For instance, in PFLAG groups (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays), parents generally form the groups in school districts for the benefit of their gay and lesbian children who have suffered discrimination or harassment. In this example of coalition-engendered emancipatory education, it is primarily the parents and friends of gay and lesbian youth who are working to change discriminatory policies and attitudes in their school districts on behalf of their children and friends.

I have been asked whether a book club would constitute an example of coalition-engendered education. Such a case could only be determined retrospectively. If in the book club's dialogues the members seek to understand epochal societal changes

around a particular issue, critically reflect on real-life situations, strive for conscientization, and develop praxis for social intervention, then certainly it meets the criteria for a coalition-engendered educational project. Merely reading a series of books together, even books dealing with social issues, would not be indicative of a coalition-engendered educational project.

Finally, because coalition-engendered education shares with action learning an emphasis on both bringing one's experience to bear on learning situations and enacting change simultaneously with the learning, are these two educational processes similar? In short, although they share some learning methods, the values and aims of coalition-engendered education are quite distinct. That is, action learning is first and foremost a vehicle of vocationalism, shaped by the values that socialize individuals into the "system" and the culture of specific occupations. Action learning may affect individuals positively, but its overarching intent is to improve organizations and professional practice in participatory ways that utilize the heretofore unrecognized experience of individuals to improve either organizations or the practice of professionals. Rather than rehabilitating or revolutionizing existing social, cultural, and economic relationships, action learning seeks to improve practice within institutional structures. Action learning and coalition-engendered education do both involve participatory learning and draw upon personal experience, but action learning is not intended to lead to conscientization or to dismantle socially unjust structures and economies. Action learning concerns professionalism and institutions; coalition-engendered education concerns voluntarism and nonformal networks.

Are there, then, other examples of emancipatory education that fit this coalition-engendered model besides the BWHBC and PFLAG groups? They abound. There were the educational projects in the settlement house movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries; Myles Horton and the Highlander Center's many offspring; the Listening Partners Project that Belenky, Bond, & Weinstock (1997) describe in *A Tradition That Has No Name*, and the underground abortion network that Laura Kaplan (1995) details in *The Story of Jane*, to mention just a few. Other examples in my community are the Coalition for Racial Justice and Equality, labor groups, and antisubordination coalitions. All of these groups are committed to both engendering their own educations and making a difference in the communities in which they live and work.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ADULT EDUCATORS AND RESEARCHERS

Because the insights that I have drawn about coalition-engendered education in this article rest on the exemplar of the BWHBC, it is important to state that there were clearly several factors that made the BWHBC's education possible that are not replicable in other contexts. For instance, these women were not only literate but had research skills that were advanced enough that they could read and make sense of difficult material. They lived in Boston, where there was ready access to medical

libraries and one of the best public libraries in the nation. Their social class meant that some of their friends were in medical or nursing school, so they were able to question these friends periodically about material that seemed confusing, as well as current practices in medicine. In other words, even though I have suggested that the BWHBC's education was similar to that of the education of other activist groups, the BWHBC was unique and privileged in many respects.

However, I would argue that even if the BWHBC's education was a complete fluke, and I believe the existence of other similar coalition-engendered educational groups indicates that this is not the case, it would be a mistake for adult educators to let a phenomenon of this sort pass without mining its conceptual ore, without asking what one could learn of it that would be applicable in other situations. Even if it is a fluke, it still represents a possibility—and education is about possibilities.

I also want to emphasize that coalition-engendered education is not appropriate for all learning situations. When adults require knowledge of a particular subject and curriculum already exists and/or a subject matter expert can guide the group through the learning process, more traditional educational approaches would be more expedient. Furthermore, coalition-engendered projects almost certainly require that the learners already be functionally literate and capable of accessing necessary research. Coalition-engendered emancipatory education can be a powerful educational force, but adults need to experience a variety of educational approaches. Coalition-engendered education is not a substitute for the classroom, an alternative to formal education. Its value is in broadening our perspectives, not further limiting them.

Why, then, should adult educators be interested in a sort of education that dispenses with their traditional role? That is, even though the field of adult education has long suggested that the role of the teacher must be decentered, that learning, not teaching, should be the focus of education, coalition-engendered education clearly makes a more radical conceptual move by theorizing a sort of adult education that diffuses the teaching function into the entire group of learners. I believe that understanding and appreciating the sort of nonformal education that occurs in coalition-engendered projects provides several benefits.

First, coalition-engendered projects provide a perspective on adult learning in nonformal contexts that is different than the view one gains from observing learning in formal settings. Seeing learning occur in situations where the whole group acts as peer teacher for the individuals within the group may be instructive about the efficacy of diffusing the boundaries between learning, teaching, and curriculum even in traditional educational venues. The comparatively chaotic, but vigorous, learning that occurs in coalition-engendered projects as members initiate, create, and facilitate their own educations can serve as a lens for critiquing formal educational activities.

Second, it is possible to look for and encourage transitory instances of coalition-engendered education already at work among students in formal settings, but outside the classroom. Comprehending the strengths developed by coalition members

during the process of engendering their own education is an opportunity to help us understand and refine our methods of helping groups of learners provide supportive, nurturing, and challenging feedback to one another.

Third, once teachers think in terms of the role diffusion common to coalition-engendered education, it is possible even in formal structures to see learners moving easily back and forth from learners to peer-teachers to creators of curriculum. Many adult learners are already comfortable living on the borders of these roles, but thinking through the lens of coalition-engendered education helps both learners and teachers watch for, and become comfortable with, these instances. Living with this diffusion requires a greater level of flexibility for teachers who have been accustomed to “managing” their classroom environments, but it can affect classrooms powerfully.

In addition to using the lens of coalition-engendered education to critique their current practice, however, I maintain that there are numerous reasons for adult educators in academic settings to encourage their students, future adult educators, to explore both historical and current coalition-engendered projects. For instance, although many of us associate adult education in the abstract with transformation, the realities of contemporary adult education practice in formal settings are often far from transformative. On the other hand, metamorphoses among members of coalition-engendered educational projects appear to be almost commonplace. Understanding the potent learning experiences that can derive from emancipatory learning is crucial. It is equally important for adult educators to realize that emancipatory learning is not just a Third World phenomenon.

Studying coalition-engendered projects also allows educators to understand both the life cycles and operation of nonformal education. Coombs (1985) described what he perceived as a common problem for nonformal programs: They “have limited survival power. They start with enthusiasm, run for a while, and then disappear” (p. 91). I agree with Coombs that nonformal programs are characteristically short lived, but I do not agree with his value statement that this is necessarily problematic. Longevity is the measuring stick of formal institutions; its help in determining the value of nonformal education in general, or coalition-engendered education in specific, is minimal. Coalition-engendered education is brought into being over some specific injustice, serves its purpose, and is disbanded. Consequently, even though the BWHBC’s work continues to this day, some 35 years after the group’s inception, this group is the exception rather than the rule. For instance, the abortion network that Kaplan (1995) describes in *The Story of Jane* was rendered unnecessary with the Supreme Court’s decision in *Roe v. Wade*; settlement houses were replaced by more permanent social service agencies. That these groups were disbanded when they were no longer as urgently necessary does not mitigate their educational value.

Furthermore, in our postmodern world it is becoming increasingly clear that uneven, ambiguous, and temporary gains are the norm (Welch, 1990, 2000). Rather than finding the fragile rhythm of social change to be disheartening, one can cele-

brate the temporary challenges to oppression that occur in coalition-engendered projects. When a group of marginalized people come together to learn that which has been withheld from them by a dominant culture and develop praxis for transforming their worlds, even partial victories are important. Short-term emancipatory educational projects can still inspire confidence in an individual's abilities to learn difficult material, to reinforce research skills, and to teach people about the possibilities involved in collective local action and critique. Even temporary successes can serve as a reminder that ordinary people can, indeed must, challenge social injustice. A momentary gain—the creation of a volunteer group that teaches reading to immigrants or the establishment of a free clinic where the dignity of each person is no longer destroyed by racism—offers a concrete model of what is sought on a larger scale. If the literacy group disbands after 2 years or the clinic loses funding, the achievements have still enlarged the imagination: They have offered glimpses of an equitable social structure. Even fleeting wins may encourage others to take action in the future and develop their own strategies for resisting injustice (Welch, 1990, 2000).

Finally, coalition-engendered education suggests that those of us who are educators might raise important professional and ethical questions about our own emancipation and praxes: What might it mean for academics to foster connections with one another to resist our own corporatization? What is the value of fostering connections with nonacademic education leaders in coalition-engendered educational projects? Understanding the richness of coalition-engendered projects can help educators recover our field's history of learning for living, as well as for earning. It can help us discover the transformations going on around us and challenge the shifting and intransigent injustices of North American society.

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