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Programming the Public Sphere

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Abstract: Adult educators are not alone in their interest in a critical education for citizenship. Still, there is no tradition of applied, middle-range work with respect to programmes. This study is a modest beginning on the slippery, delicate, paradox-ridden muddle of operationalizing a critical education for citizenship in Canada.

Critical education for citizenship

A long-held tradition of Canadian adult education, citizen education is now garnering attention from scholars in many other social sciences. Regrettably, the recent Canadian work on citizen education is not a viable foundation for a critical education of citizenship for adults, even with modifications. However, adult education (as a field) has not yet articulated a satisfactory alternative. As Apple has remarked about critical theory, in the matter of a critical education for citizenship, there is only highly developed meta-theory and an undeveloped tradition of applied, middle-range work. The missing work is of course daunting—no less than actualizing models of bounded learning processes (a) to raise and explore the complexities of citizenship in late capitalism (b) employing an architecture sound enough to involve a whole nation of learners and (c) being congruent with the fundamental premises of critical education.

Program planning, design, and development—processes redolent of technical rationality—are not the favoured tools of critical adult pedagogues. Indeed most educational programs are considerably less fluid, complex and ambitious than a critically informed education in contemporary citizenship. But even if the popular usage of *program planning* usually conjures something smaller and tighter, there is no semantic restriction to invoking *program planning* at a marco-level too. I use *programme* planning as an idiosyncratic cue to signal the difference. Scale and initial opacity does not alter the basic two-step process of planning (1) clarify intentions and (2) plot actions to realize intentions. The exercise is the same at any level.

For Cervero and Wilson (1994), planning is a matter of deliberation and practical reasoning, making the most defensible judgements about what to do in light of what is **possible** (as defined by the constraints imposed by circumstances) and what is **desirable** (as defined by a set of values and judgements). In this study of programming for a critical education for citizenship, the **desirable** component of planning is privileged and the **possible** employed analytically to highlight social and structural obstacles.

Methodology

To 'liberate' a critically informed programme in contemporary citizenship from the unbounded thicket obscuring it, this study used standard tools from the Sork program [sic] design model as heuristic devices. The tools are the six design steps (or stages) of (1) analysis of planning context and client system, (2) justification and focus of planning, (3) clarification of intended outcomes, (4) formulation of instructional plan, (5) formulation of administrative plan and (6) development of evaluation (summative and formative) plan (Sork, 1988). In this initial attempt to programme the public sphere, the tools were engaged twice; once, to specify a desirable version of each design element and therefore a programme close to the ideal, second, to articulate a possible programme that acknowledges constraints and realities. Each time, I began from (1) *analysis of planning context and client system*, and proceeded linearly to (6) *evaluation*. This study takes them up sequentially to provide a small measure of protection for the **desirable**

before the **possible** hobbles it. (In practise, the two (that is the **desirable** and the **possible**) are iterative and collapsed into the same single plan).

Findings

A Programme Design Developed from Values and Judgements

Analysis of planning context and client system. The planning context is Canadian society and the state of democracy during late modernity/capitalism in Canada and abroad. With others, Canadians are noting that the spread of democratic governments and global progress have not engendered sufficient democratic ideals and outcomes. The gap between the rich and the poor inside Canada and the gap between rich and poor countries is commonplace knowledge. Many Canadians are concerned and even alarmed that their society does not show the qualities of social cohesion and equity they hold as desirable. Some are involved in political parties, public demonstrations, and social movements to address that. Others experience the issues viscerally but have little opportunity to reflect on their discomfort, examine it, make sense of it, reach an informed opinion or validate their views by discussion with others. ‘Bowling alone’ (Puttman, 2002) is not exclusively an American phenomenon.

Matters of concern about the democratic deficit are sometimes taken up through the roles of worker, parent, taxpayer, caregiver, and member of professional or special interest groups but the common platform is citizenship. Unfortunately, the traditional democratic institutions seem unable to animate disaffected citizens right now. Yet Canadians across Canada voicing their dreams and their disappointments about the quality of democratic life within Canada (and internationally) to and among each other would be refreshing and potentially catalyzing if carried out in an atmosphere of collaboration, respect, and problem solving. The ideal process could be multiple small group conversations and exchanges about contemporary citizenship, participation, engagement, responsibility, individual and group action, and the society they desire. Sensitive to the most egregious manipulation and bias, a learning framework would provide the right tone, be a useful organizing and planning structure, and build a temporal public sphere to look at the bigger one more closely.

The client for a programme in critical citizenship, civil society, the public sphere *et al.* is the Canadian citizen. (The paradox of equating **citizen** with **client** is acknowledged). Most will be adults with their full majority. Youth not yet of voting age and landed immigrants not yet with voting rights are also potential learners as deliberative democracy and deliberative citizenship are not achieved exclusively by voting. Clients are scattered across a large piece of geography (Pacific to Atlantic coast). More reside in urban settings than rural ones. The learners would be any interested Canadian, without regard for prior education, work status, occupation, or income.

Although the planning context of this programme is as large as Canadian society, there are few national organizations with the capacity to convene this sensitive learning and educational programme on critical citizenship. Constitutionally, education is under provincial jurisdiction, and tends to focus on schooling and children; federal learning initiatives are oriented to adults and training for the labour market. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation has the geographic reach and focuses on public issues but tends to be lost in the media babble. Other organizations such as the citizen-based Council on Canadians are not “neutral” enough and Canadians would be sceptical of a government initiative. The **desirable** body would be a pan-Canadian, funded publicly agency/system free of partisan politics with a good track record in innovative lifelong learning staffed by innovative and creative program designers, facilitators, content experts, and learning technology specialists. No existing body seems to quite fit the bill.

Justification and focus of planning. The relevant questions about justification are subsumed in a consideration of need and benefit. The need is only too evident—economic imperatives leave little room for socially specific development and goals. The knowledge-based society has been hollowed out to only a dubious knowledge-based economy. Corporate social responsibility is an oxymoron born of public relations and spin-doctoring. Indeed with the decline of the public sector in Canada, more businesses are using the language of covenant (care, commitment, values) to pursue their interests while the public sector is taking up the language of contract (client, customer, deliverable, product). Some critics argue the decay of public language numbs our capacity for conceptual thinking about fundamental issues (Watson, 2003).

The public sphere is a space (or multiple spaces) where there is an unfettered flow of relevant information and ideas feeding the formation of public will. That space is far from robust in Canada. The boom in information and data brought about by new communication technologies is overwhelming in volume and unreliable in trustworthiness. Media offers more entertainment and commercial messages than journalism in the public interest, and the popularizing benefits of media are countered by trivialization and sensationalism. The Net as the newest medium holds possibilities but legal, technical and corporate structures are diminishing them as global cultural conglomerates harness the Net for commercial purposes (Lessig, 2002).

Communication between citizens in the public sphere about matters of the public sphere is of limited interest to an industrialized media seeking ultimately to connect advertisers with buyers. However, non-manipulated communication based on understanding, trust, and shared knowledge is still in the interest of citizens and citizenship. Information is important of course, and media provides a great deal, including information about public events and some public life, but media do not provide conditions helpful to absorbing, assessing, discarding, accepting, integrating and conceptualizing information. The focus of the needed programme would be creation of many non-manipulative communication spaces for citizen-learners to exchange opinion and thought inside them about new citizenship—not to produce a common manifesto, but to create a shared and deeper understanding.

Clarification of intended outcome. The intended outcome is a fuller realization of the form of democracy—domestically and globally—desired by Canadians. Programme content may be still amorphous but the intent is very clear—movement towards deliberate democracy, strong democracy (Barber, 1984), deep democracy (Clarke, 1996), and radical democracy (Mouffle, 1993).

Formulate instructional plan. The instructional plan should centre first on process, and second, on content. The process would be built around dialogue and discussion, informed by Habermas's ideal speech situation. Dialogue could take many different forms but the fundamental principle must be time and occasion for all participants to offer input and be heard. A possible instructional plan is multiple small group discussion in each province feeding into, and back from, larger group discussions. These dialogues should occur right across Canada.

Education for citizenship is the broad text, disappointment in current-day democracy the sub-text, and the Gordian knot of democracy, late capitalism and globalization the context. For a critically informed programme, matters embedded in the subtext and context—civil society, the public sphere, the democratic commons, consumerism, the commercialization of media, the medization of ideas, the lack of horizontal public discourse, information overload—all must become text (and discussion topics) for quotient adult Canadians. Obviously, citizenship itself should be problematized (Beiner, 1995; Brodie & Trimble, 2003).

Formulation of administrative plan. The logistics at this level are finances and marketing. Financing of the programming must be such that that registration fees are not a barrier for participation. For some portion of the participants, this will mean no registration fee. The source of the funding must not compromise the critical intent of the programme. Marketing must be planned to attract a cross-section of Canadians, including citizens with fewer 'dialogue chances', and therefore likely to call for novel approaches.

Development of evaluation plan. The ideal summative evaluation plan would be assessment of whether or not momentum for democratic reform resulted from this programme. Practically speaking, there are too many ineffable and intervening social dynamics to make such evaluation more than an academic exercise. Even coming to agreement about indicators seems too crude. The worth of this programme should rest with on **a priori** consensus that democracy education is worth doing, and doing well. The evaluation, then, is to what extent democratic principles were used and applied throughout. Add to this assessment, reports from participants. Unless they value the experience in which they have participated, the programme will have failed. Failure is serious, as further disenchantment may result, hence the need for formative evaluation. At this stage, it is too early to formulate the specifics of formative evaluation plan, although feedback from participants will be key.

A necessary step between visioning and enacting programming in the public sphere is an agency or organization (or partnership of same) of the sort sketched in the first step to provide co-ordination and resources. Alternatives include creating such an agency from scratch, creating a virtual agency through partnership arrangements among a number of existing organizations, or even letting a thousand flowers bloom. But for purposes of bracketing and making a plan of the **possible**, this study proposes the the Canadian university sector as the educational programme agent/sponsor. More particularly, all universities in each province of Canada are proposed as sponsors. Some rationalization for this boldness is embedded in the presentation of the six programme design phases below.

A University Sponsored Programme on Contemporary Citizenship.

Having uncovered what is desirable in programming the public sphere in the last section, the following examines what is possible, by attending to constraints imposed by university 'circumstances'.

Analysis of planning context and client system. The shift from the **desirable** to the **possible** does not change the planning context or the client system. Considerations of both in the first planning process can be leavened and enriched by the expertise resident in university departments of sociology, social psychology, political science, marketing, continuing studies, humanities, community development, social work, philosophy, education, and cultural studies. The delicate distinction between education and indoctrination/propaganda is noted but there is no denying the programme is normative. Universities will be challenged to organize learning in ways that appeals to and will work with a wider range of learners than is their normal practice.

The mission and rationale of publicly funded universities in Canada are congruent with critical education for contemporary citizenship. A function of Canadian universities is the provision of higher education. One meaning of *higher* in Canadian society is the value placed on the collective. An educational process promoting engagement with fundamental matters of the collective is a from of higher education. Universities have the pedagogical expertise to programme in sound, substantive, peer-based learning, even if their specialization is higher education for degrees. A process to engage Canadians in thinking about democracy should involve citizens from every province. Every province has universities; most provinces have more

than one. A nationally conceived programme is not likely to account for regional and provincial differences, but regionally distributed universities can particularize.

Clarification of intended outcomes. Risk analysis shows that the positive regard of participants (a qualitative factor) in a pilot involving a modest number of Canadians is more important than minimum-criteria or nominal success with many people (a quantitative measure). A possible outcome could be that each university engage between 100 to 1000 citizens in an appropriate dialogical learning opportunity in contemporary citizenship. Canada has seventy-two universities; therefore an intended outcome might be the successful engagement of 7, 200 to 72, 000 Canadians.

Formulation of instructional plan. The ‘instructional’ plan must start with dialogue (process) and work back to content. Planning, especially of sequencing and feedback, will be required to create dialogue for deliberate and constructive engagement with the views, values and feelings of others. Methodology may be some variation on Open Space (see www.openspaceworld.org), talking circles, or new strategies from models of collaborative learning with web-based dialogue. Skilled facilitators will be needed and some faculty members are effective as such, as are some other university employees and members of the community.

The content of the discussion would emerge from consideration of four questions; (1) to what extent are you (the citizen-learner) satisfied with democracy in Canada, (2) what would you like to see changed, different or improved, (3) what are the steps to be taken to do that, (4) what is the role of the individual citizen in making that happen. In the process of considering these questions (or better shaped variants of them), citizen-learners may need information, content and/or expert knowledge, in which case the instructional plan will incorporate information provision in keeping with the dialogic frame. The duration of the learning event is difficult to quantify, but one “saw-off” is 12 hours over 2 months (3 hours x 4 meetings) —a calculation involving the time experience suggests is necessary for a dialogue significant enough to promote change and the amount of time people might be persuaded to commit in advance to a unproven programme and as yet unfamiliar learning experience. The instructional plans should anticipate an appropriate Part II and III.

Scholarly work with most relevance for participatory citizenship is found in critical communications studies, (Dalgren, 2002, 2003; Raboy, 2001; Bennett & Endman, 2001; Drysek, 1990; Moscoe, 2001; Chambers & Kymlicka, 2002). Communication and information technologies that enhance reciprocal, peer-based meaning-making use are encouraged.

Formulation of administrative plan. For this plan, administration is kept deliberately simply and defined as marketing and managing logistics. Marketing will be more varied than universities “normally” employ and include social marketing or local, neighbourhood and membership-based strategies. There would either be no fee for participation or a sliding scale of fees. The site of the individual events (small group discussion) can be any public space ‘accessible’ to the range of learners sought, and include virtual spaces if the latter is non-discriminatory.

Development of summative and formative evaluation. The two-track process mentioned already in the **desirable** rendition of programme design is recommended. One track would be collection of participant reflections. The second would be an assessment of the extent to which democratic principles (inclusion) were actualized in each element of the programme. For sheer efficiency, let that assessment be done via the Eisner connoisseur evaluation model (Madeus, Scriven, & Stufflebeam, 1993, p.335), with the expert being a democracy specialist from outside Canada. To this connoisseur evaluation, add the participants’ reports of their experiences.

Consider contracting with a local journalist or graduate students in the social sciences to collect and report them.

The biggest obstacle to Canadian universities assuming this role is that they have not done so before—and therefore call for genuine innovation and new paradigms for lifelong higher learning.

Conclusions

The study points to several problems in planning a critically framed intervention around contemporary citizenship as a pan-Canadian initiative. They include: (1) the permeable borders of globalization (2) the federal-provincial jurisdictional agreements about education (3) the long association of education with schooling conventions (4) the formal educational system's interest in adult learners mainly as new markets and clients (5) lack of attention within adult education to purposeful education initiatives for large numbers of people (6) the lack of adult education scholarship examining today's public sphere as a learning site (7) attention to the role of media in civil society (8) investigation of open learning being left to the advocates of technologically mediated distance education, (9) the anti-democratic practices of universities as the only public institution with a mission and resources minimally appropriate to sponsor education for citizenship (10) the paralysis of able advocates because of careers as faculty in the same public institutions that need reform

Implications for adult education theory and practice

Far from having a monopoly on the text/content, adult educators could only partner with scholars in critical communication (communication for democracy) to develop understanding about public talk, particularly the role of media in constructing the public sphere. Colleagues in political science and political economy can illuminate the relevant dynamics of power. An interdisciplinary research program in communications, learning, and political science is over-due.

Unfortunately, adult education has no monopoly expertise in creating a learning architecture for large numbers of people. Adult educators know little about private spaces versus public space for maximizing opinion formation and learning. Adult education, however, has an excellent grasp of the profound learning that can be extracted from experience, collective reflection, and dialogue among peers in informal, casual, everyday settings.

The challenge to the field of adult education is not only intellectual, but also ethical and political. The credentialing of adult educators is in the hands of the academy. The academy rests that responsibility with the faculty who teach in its graduate programs. Many adult education faculty can speak passionately about the importance of critical education in (participatory, deliberate, deep) democracy, but are loath to advocate inside their institution for resources to support programming for the sort of learners this programming is meant to engage. Without democracy in education, education in democracy is handicapped.

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