The Story of a Broken Sofa:
Adult Education Meets Activist Art to Envision the Future of Adult Education

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Abstract

This AERC Symposium addressed envisioning an Adult Education structure that meets societal needs. Within an activist art project paradigm, old and new adult education theories and practices informed the discussion.

Keywords: 21st Century Education, Metagogy, Activist Art, CbLP, Service Learning, PLA

The purpose of Adult Education, a hotly debated topic, continues to pique the interest of educators. From workforce development to liberatory education for social justice, adult education has been scaffolded by many an ideology. In our current world re-ordering with violent upheavals and pandemic-ridden panicking denizens, we have added developing intercultural effectiveness competencies, geo-political partnering, and racial healing to the menu of principles that guide our profession. Now is a critical time to problem-pose and identify how Adult Education can build this elusive *better quality of life for all* we promote as our profession's raison d'être. With that in mind, the constructs and ideas for this Symposium at the 63rd AERC reflected many contemporary themes, encouraging students, researchers, and practitioners to *enter into lively debate over the future direction and research of adult education*.

Our Symposium entitled, *The Story of a Broken Sofa: Adult Education Meets Activist Art to Envision the Future of Adult Education,* focused on the purpose of Adult Education and how it ought to evolve during this time of global trends, shocks, and changes. As facilitators, we brought diverse vantage points to the table for further discourse in our field. At this writing, the many voices we expected to hear at the Symposium have not yet been amplified in a follow-up summary to be included here. Nonetheless, such is the plan to inform our broader community of practice of the diverse and conflicting perspectives and concerns. We invite the readers to contribute to the discourse, whether that be within their community of practice or by reaching out to us for continuing dialogue. We believe it is indeed a critical time for those who are tasked with educating adults as much as the to-be-educated to speak up and be at the decision-making table when it comes to the content and format of teaching and learning.

The Concerns

Formal or non-formal, Adult Education has had significant impact on the forming of its denizens from the beginning of the profession being recognized as such in the USA. From hosiery factories to Americanization programs in the early 1800's, to the Farmers Institutes in the mid-1800s, to vocational education since the early 1900s, to the ABE and literacy movements of the mid-1900s, to technical and other training programs geared at industry and military needs in the 2000s, the US government legislated a vast variety of adult education programs (Chugai, 2014). Simultaneously over the centuries, community-initiated endeavors sprang up with the changing needs of society during transitionary social movements as much as via influences from abroad. In recent history, these included the Chautauqua Institute (Rieser, 2003) and the Highlander Institute (Horton et al., 1997), the Black Panther Party's liberatory education programs (Alston, 2017), and

the many Freirean-inspired community-based initiatives and programs that emphasized education as a means for emancipation of self and communities as much as for liberation from prevailing systems and oppression (Freire, 1970; Facundo, 2014).

Controversial as any of these examples of adult education programs may be from any vantage point, they created the landscape within the social institution *Adult Education* continues to exist. For decades, tomes of research by academics, practitioner-scholars, and activists have called for critical reflection on the authentic needs of people. Such efforts are in evidence in the global arena with the many internationally informed declarations, e.g., the *2003 World Declaration on Higher Education for the 21st Century: Vision and Action* (UNESCO, 2003), or the *Hamburg Declarations* by participants at the 5th International Conference on Adult Learning (2009). Yet, in spite of these voices, in the main, our Adult Education praxis has not yet adjusted to our changed and changing world. The calls for intercultural competence have been heard by many scholars (e.g., Strohschen & Elazier, 2007; Han, 2011; Gourlay & Strohschen, 2019), calling for educational policy reform and curricula that are organized around 21st Century knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Recently, Darling-Hammond et al. (2022) spoke again to the sort of 21st Century skills necessary for informed and internationally competitive citizens. Focused on the future by design, critical thinking, problem-solving, research, investigation, explanation, analysis, and open-ended project-based assessment ought to include problem-based learning approaches with learners engaged individually and collaboratively in self-initiated projects, they insist.

Given this orientation, the main concerns that were to be addressed at this AERC Symposium pivoted on current global transformations and their implications on education enterprises, research, and the societal obligations of our education institutions. The discourse was to be informed by participants at the Symposium as much as by a variety of stakeholders in the presented community-based learning project (CbLP). The intent was to pose and discuss any given concern but to do so from disparate perspectives of participants. Therefore, we first teased out approaches to educating adults by providing a multi-dimensional example: an activist art project. This illustrated how an ABCD-informed assessment uncovers myriad values and assets to address community needs. It also clarified multiple teaching approaches, highlighting multiple theories, practices, and ideologies. Insights from students, NfP leaders, artists, and faculty engaged in such activist art projects showed:

o   How community engagement, self-empowerment, self-efficacy, and entrepreneurship development among community members can be achieved by working jointly on a guided upholstery activist art projects such a *Teena's Legacy* concept (Smith, n.d.)

o   How CBE for university students can be designed in cross-cultural, cross-sector teams, grounded in activities that meet authentic needs of a community as defined by community residents and learned and practiced within a CbLP (i.e., teaching and learning skills such as action research, ISD, canvassing, marketing, ABCD strategies, project planning, social justice projects, liberatory education techniques, event planning, foreign language, and so much more)

o   How NfP staff and faculty can benefit from collaboratively designed curricula with clearly defined tasks for students and personalized purposes (e.g., pre-service learning project training, engagement by faculty <u>at</u> community sites with their students; instructional methods and content co-designed <u>with</u> NfP staff based on community needs, authentic assessment of learning outcomes by means <u>other than</u> writing papers or taking tests).

Hence, service-learning (*on steroids*) expanded with CBE, the Metagogy theorem, CbLPs, and PLA were examined for their interrelatedness. The remainder of this paper briefly delineates

key concepts considered during the Symposium. With the summary and conclusion, we hope to entice the readers to engage in a continued dialogue within collaborative exchanges and cross-program sharing of practices in written or *zooming* formats. We invite you to join us on as we move forward with our inquiry and commitment to re-amplify our voices. As put so succinctly by Palmer and Zajonc (2010),

> The richness of the world will not reveal itself by a single means of inquiry.
> Not only are many questions required, but they must be posed and explored
> in different ways, each one of which illuminates the word from another direction,
> inner as well as outer.   (p. 93)

Toward a Praxis of Inclusion: Teaching and Learning Together
The Symposium Discussion Starter
The founder of the concept, Jamika Smith of *Teena's Legacy*, described activist art projects: how a tattered sofa or chairs is re-upholstered in a design informed by denizens of a disinvested community. Project participants and artists chimed in via brief video reflections. The sofa or chair designs typically depict needs, assets, and hopes of a community in the form of creative images and adornments. Such projects consist of a 6-session workshop with several demonstration events at community centers to provide access to this approach locally and engage neighbors and artists in the neighborhoods in self- and social/community transformation. Prior to, as much as a means for, recruitment of participants, demonstration events are an opportunity for participants to collectively design and upholster a chair at each event. The themes for the discussion vary. For example, one recent chair upholstery demonstration event in the Austin neighborhood of Chicago fell on the 2022 International Women's Day with the theme of *#BreakTheBias*. The discussion focused on stereotypes about women; and short phrases were shouted out, then written by participants on an old, dirty chair. The group tore off the old, reupholstered the chair, and engaged in lively discussion on the status of women.
The Concept
Art opens the closets, airs out the cellars and attics. It brings healing (Julia Cameron)
The overall concept of any of Jamika's projects intends to merge culture, visual arts, and fine crafting with community engagement to provide not only access to *doing* art, but also to celebrating creativity and assets in a community as a means to identify and address community needs. By designing and creating textile art for rejuvenating broken furniture, participants express how culturally-grounded images, perspectives on a neighborhood, and visions for a better future can bring the community together and work for change. In intergenerational groups made up of community members and grassroots organizations, such activities lead to (re)habilitating, (re)energizing, and (re)vitalizing individuals and the neighborhood. Re-upholstered in guided workshops with local creatives, a sofa or a chair tells the neighborhood story and sharing the story can, indeed, mobilize a community when art shows the way.
While learning design, creating covers, and upholstering the chairs, participants engage in critical discussions on neighborhood issues, share concerns and ideas, and analyze the upholstery process as a *metaphor for renewal*. These activities set a course for a movement of healing action and community building. The message depicted in the upholstery design comes from the souls of the neighborhood. The creations are brought to other communities to share the stories they tell, often finding common ground across communities. It is often *safer* to identify *issues* through creative expressions than speaking up in community meetings about them. The ultimate goal of Jamika's projects is to engage neighborhood groups and allies with activist art as a means for

individual and community empowerment, cross-neighborhood organizing, and strengthening civic engagement across prevailing *~isms* and boundaries to recognize the assets that do exist.

Clearly, this lends itself for multi-faceted service learning. Activist art has a long history in mobilizing disenfranchised communities to address issues and inspire change and to connect *outsiders* with the reality of the communities. Playing a pivotal role in social-justice struggles (e.g., from IWW to Civil Rights to BLM movements), art and artists have contributed to change as much as to creating new art forms. *Teena's Legacy* (Smith, n.d.) and partners are committed to a vision of healing and resurrection. The projects increase the capacity of participants to visualize change, in self and for the community. Ultimately, when a diverse group of disparate people engage in mutual support during an upholstery project, make connections, and find common ground in a safe space, personal transformation and community development becomes a *seen* possibility.

Connecting to the Future: Metagogy, PLA, and Adult Learning
Metagogy

With *Metagogy*, Strohschen and Associates (2016) described an inclusive approach to instruction *by, with, and for* student and teacher that emphasizes collaborative teaching and learning. Metagogy is not another *~gogy*. It draws from many theories and philosophies, moving instructional approaches on a *spectrum* in a progressive and retrogressive manner, i.e., from dependent/more directive to interdependent/less directive, as best suited and aligned for a learning task and the level of readiness of a learner. It is grounded in disparate ideologies and philosophies that are *blended* to encourage a *both-and* attitude toward selecting instructional strategies, methods, and techniques to meet given learning tasks (Strohschen, 2009). Reciprocal relationships are formed wherein all stakeholders alternate teaching and learning roles for the advantage of individual and community growth and transformation (Strohschen, 2014; Strohschen & Associates, 2016). Within a metagogical mindset, content and format of Adult Education becomes collaboratively implemented to serve individuals within a social justice-oriented goal that might be achieved when equal economic, political and social rights, and opportunities exist for all. With this, the *Metagogy* theorem offers a relatively simple effort to lead to needed (and that means determined by denizens, business leaders, elected officials, educators) systemic changes inside of Adult Education academic structures.

Once values and assumptions are critically examined (Brookfield, 1995), leadership can be provided by educators in designing and implementing ABCD and critical-emancipatory, action-based, CbLP-informed within collaboratively implemented strategies and methods. In other words, an *Adult Education* that meets the changed and changing needs of today's adults. Civic engagement and social justice-oriented research projects ought to grow organically to achieve desired results through collective action. A solid example of this kind of approach is described in the Gustavus Adolphus College Community-based Service & Learning unit. The College is classified by Camus Connect (See https://compact. org/who-we-are/) and received the Carnegie Foundation Elective Community Engagement Classification. The approach is based on these program principles, which are congruent with the goals of PAR and CbLP such as our activist art project:

o **Reflective Practice:** Course requirements and syllabus provide a method for students to reflect on what they learned through the engaged experience and how these relate to the subject of the course, as well as to students' civic development and responsibility

o **Community Partner Involvement:** Community partners are consulted at key stages during the project and their input is woven into project implementation. A final evaluation of the project and partnership is completed, shared appropriately, and used to make needed changes to future activities

- o **Focus on Realistic Solutions:** Research results and recommendations focus on realistic solutions and appreciation of community assets rather than merely pointing out problems and deficits
- o **Appropriateness of Student Preparation:** Students are appropriately prepared academically and provided with the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for successfully completing the engagement project.
  Source:https://gustavus.edu/communityservice/faculty.php

Prior Learning Assessment

Since the mid-70s, PLA promoted lifelong learning, not limiting college-level learning to formal classroom settings (Stevens, 2013). With rigorous evaluation of work experience and life events, PLA's learner-centered approaches offer innovations in degree programs, increasing access for a multiversity of students. PLA is best defined as *a systematic process that involves the identification, documentation, assessment and recognition of learning [i.e., skills, knowledge and values]* (Day, 2002, p. ix; brackets in original). Throughout the assessment process, the assessor evaluates the evidence of learning against CAEL guidelines, institutional guidelines, competence criteria, and his or her own predetermined assumptions about what equals college-level learning (Stevens, 2013).

From the 1989 CAEL original set of guidelines for PLA (Whitaker, 1989) to the updated version (Fiddler, Marienau and Whitaker, 2006, p. xi), five specific principles remain:

- o Credit should be awarded only for learning and not for experience.
- o College credit should be awarded only for college-level learning.
- o Credit should be awarded only for learning that has a balance, appropriate to the subject, between theory and practical application.
- o The determination of competence levels and of credit awards must be made by appropriate subject-matter and academic experts.
- o Credit should be appropriate to the academic content in which it is accepted.

These were further modified by Younger and Marienau in 2017,

- o Credit or competencies are awarded only for evidence of learning and not for experience or time spent.
- o Assessment is integral to learning because it leads to and enables future learning.
- o Assessment is based on criteria for outcomes that are clearly articulated and shared among constituencies.
- o The determination of credit awards and competency levels are made by appropriate subject matter and credentialing experts.
- o Assessment advances the broader purpose of access and equity for diverse individuals and groups to support their success.

The verbiage in the CAEL guidelines was updated in an effort to reflect the evolution in time, changes in higher education, and an increase in diversity. This also sheds light on the necessary surge of accepting multiple ways of knowing and the demand for equality and access, particularly pressing in our changed and changing skill sets needed by a global citizenry. Learning can and does take place outside of higher education. Limiting this is oppressive.

Adult Learning

As we know, adults learn in multiple ways. Within PLA, experience is vital, although the learning from that experience is crucial. Evidence of the Experiential Learning Cycle is often the pattern reflected within the mode chosen to demonstrate learning. According to Kolb (1984), experiential learning *is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience* (p. 41)*.* With that definition, experiential learning is learning derived from experiences in life, and it is imperative to add that this is learning outside of formal education (Rose, 1989).

Breaking this down further, formal learning is more organized, structured, and intentional *and is explicitly designated as* learning (Adam, 2008, p. 28). Formal learning typically includes course work, seminars, and workshops facilitated by higher education or organizations, and training meetings led by other faculty, companies, HR departments, or technology. Non-formal learning is an alternate and is considered a complement to formal learning. It is learning that occurs, has organization, and is implanted in planned activities or teaching skills. People without training or those with minimal formal training gain confidence and understand more of what they need to do by seeking help from others. Informal learning is happening constantly. Informal learning is not structured and is learner-centered. It is also intentional. Self-directed learning and lifelong learning are examples of informal learning. It is the individual pursuit of understanding.

That said, *teaching and learning* does not necessarily fit neatly into a box; certainly not into one of the boxes that are constructed based on an *either-or* blueprint designed by but one architect. It is necessary to acknowledge that learning cannot fully be defined, definitely not by educationists only. Learning has been viewed through a multiple of lenses, e.g., Critical Theory, Critical Race Theory, Feminist Theory, Liberatory Model, Gender Model, Queer Theory (Stevens & Strohschen, 2021). Applying alternate to conventionally accepted *ways of knowing* gives a fuller picture of the learning and allows learners to empower themselves when we validate that learning has taken place based on mutually designed means of assessment. Given our passion and compassion, our credos and curricula, and our vast and diverse knowledge and creativity of *how to teach*, it may but take a slight segueing into a *both-and* mindset to adapt our education institutions to the needs of today's and tomorrow's learners who ought to gain the so-termed 21st Century skills.

Conclusion

Although an activist art projects is collaboratively designed learning experience by and with all participants, it is built upon instructional approaches that are grounded in the Metagogy theorem with its interdependent concepts, described above. As such, from the participatory and collaborative cross-cultural, cross-sector, cross-disciplinary teaching and learning activist art paradigm, Symposium participants were invited to extrapolate principles and tenets for novel design and delivery of *Adult Education* content and purpose in their context. Most importantly, with our analysis through the lenses of varying ideologies and theories, any arrived-at theoretical solutions were intended to lead us to further discourse, inquiry, research topics, and design infrastructure considerations at the Symposium to revisit the *why and how* of Adult Education for our 21st Century world. The perspectives of not only the Symposium facilitators, but also the insights from the vantage points of Symposium participants sought to inform the vision and mission of a future *Adult Education* praxis. Our array of ideals and ideas is poised to advance a rich narrative, essentially constituting inquiry topics. Moreover, the Symposium provided an added benefit by connecting participants for further critical discourse with proposed follow-up exchanges. The Symposium facilitators offer a vehicle for such continued dialogue within our established USA-wide and international partnerships and through publication and presentation

opportunities, in addition to supporting the much-appreciated AERC-established conferences and webinars. *Contact the authors for more information*.

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Figure 1

The discarded chair and its transformed self after the demonstration event