



# Participation in adult and community education: a discourse of diminishing returns

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The terms in which the dominant discourse of participation is framed systematically re-inforces one particular view about the relationship between life and learning. It is one in which participation in learning is professionally and institutionally controlled and, consequently, defined largely in vocational, instrumental and individual terms. A significant absence in the dominant discourse is an understanding of participation which draws on the experience of the radical tradition in adult education. In a context where there is potential for greater participation in social and civic politics, as evidenced by the growth of social movements, reconnecting with radical ideas about participation in education can lead to rethinking the 'problem of participation' and its implications. We need to understand not only how the discourse of participation has generated knowledge but also excludes and limits what is known. A thorough critique is necessary and overdue and one that is critical of the 'regime of truth' which has been seeded, cultivated and harvested through the dominant professional discourse.

...in a society in which learning is unequal certain distinctive kinds of ignorance accumulate in the very heartland of learning. This heartland defines itself; it defines what learning is; it deems what is a subject and what is not. (Williams in McIlroy and Westwood 1993: 259)

Perhaps the most ploughed furrow in adult education research is that of participation. The survey literature on the subject is weighty, formidable and characterized by unexceptionally similar findings. Local, national and international studies of participation (for example, Lowden 1985, McGivney 1990; Sargent *et al.* 1997, OECD 1979) have been strikingly consistent in informing us about who does and does not participate: not surprisingly it is 'higher' social classes, the young, men and those seeking vocational education who are already well educated who participate more. Within working class groups the same features which characterize inequalities between classes are mirrored (Hedoux, cited in McGivney 1990). Again, it is the materially better off, the more educated and the more socially active who participate. On the other side of the 'learning divide', the non-participants are typically working class, with a minimum of education, ethnic minority groups, the aged, some groups of women (housebound mothers, women from lower socioeconomic groups), unemployed young adults and so on. A pattern of provision that has been remarkably consistent over a long period of time – study after study has welded an 'iron law' of participation.

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Despite our understanding of participation have we also, in Williams' terms, accumulated a distinctive kind of ignorance too? And, if so, can further research enlighten the heartland of learning? Or does it make it more difficult for us to see where our own ignorance lies? Has a law of diminishing returns set in which needs to be broken? Do we need a fresh way to look at participation? If we think the answer to these questions is yes, then what it requires is a systematic interrogation of the assumptions made about participation. Something more than a review of the literature, or a reconceptualization of it, is necessary. Such approaches stay within the dominant discourse and may simply reaffirm participation as a problem which better informed adult educators and policy makers can do something about (see Blair *et al.* 1995). This is not to demean the integrity of such efforts, but to recognize the limitations of the discourse in which they are framed. Instead, the approach taken in this paper seeks to deconstruct the rules of the dominant discourse in order to make clear what is left out by it.

### Deconstructing the discourse

Discourses are essential for constructing what we know and, more importantly, the limits of what is knowable about the world. They constitute the language, assumptions, ways of thinking, problems and practises which are regarded as appropriate and legitimate. Discourses on adult returners, in this perspective, are not simply 'true' or 'false' statements about why adults participate, why they do not and what can be done about it. They work on another level as practises for constructing our understanding of what counts as participation and what does not.

The more powerful the discourse the more deeply embedded in our common sense are its problems, its definitions of learning, its understanding of participation and the range of appropriate 'solutions'. Discourses generate a 'way of knowing' which frame our knowledge and understanding and, at the same time, they also exclude other ways in which we can know a subject. They are not neutral and constitute, in Foucault's (1991) terms, knowledge/power formations; knowledge is constructed out of relations of power and, in turn, is part of the process of reconstituting power. People are also positioned in the discourse in unequal ways. For example, in relation to participation the discourse is largely a professional one 'internal' to adult educators and policy makers, rather than being constructed 'externally', by students. The voice of the latter group appear as objects of research mediated by the wisdom of the more powerfully placed 'experts'. Consequently, the professional knowledge/power formation on participation embodies professional interests and concerns in constructing what participation means, how it occurs and the ways it can be furthered.

It would be wrong to assume that the dominant discourse is static or monolithic. Discourses are systems of possibility which create knowledge. For example, the current preoccupation of adult educators with 'lifelong learning' and 'self-directed' learning (as distinct from adult education) involves broadening the professional wisdom about participation. As Tight (1998) points out, different definitions of learning in research can lead to very different results. For example, the broad one adopted by Beinart and Smith's *National Adult Learning Survey* (1997) takes into account 'taught' as well as 'self-taught' learning efforts and highlights a divide between different types of learning, i.e. more people engage in 'self-taught' learning than in 'taught' learning. In comparison, the definition of learning as a 'taught' activity used by Sargant *et al.* (1997) can lead to

a picture of a 'learning divide' between those who have more and receive more, and those who have had little and receive less. In the former, the role of the educator is linked with the facilitation of individually defined learning projects. In the latter, with widening and deepening access for excluded groups. Either way, the discourse displaces debate about the key issue of why we assume participation is important, i.e. what purposes does education serve.

It is worth highlighting what is not being said. Deconstructing the dominant discourse does not mean questioning the 'truth' value of the knowledge it generates. Neither is it being argued that improved access into educational provision is irrelevant. Instead, its purpose is to make visible the limits of the dominant discourse in order to know its rules for inclusion and exclusion. Whose interests are served by the way participation is constructed? Who loses? What is absent from the dominant discourse? What don't we see? What are the implications of seeing participation differently? Deconstructing the dominant discourse is a necessary step in reconstructing the problem of participation in a different way. Participation has been framed, it is argued, so as to separate off adult education from a more radical tradition. If the dominant discourse can be opened up perhaps new possibilities for thinking about participation, what purposes it serves and how we as adult educators relate to it, may emerge.

'Ways of knowing' in discourses are constructed through 'rules', however, these are not consciously followed. Instead, they provide the preconditions for formulating knowledge. In Gramscian terms they constitute a 'common sense' that is taken for granted rather than justified. Their status as rules reflect that they operate 'behind the backs' of speakers within a discourse. What is more, they serve to position people so that 'authors' and 'audiences' – those with a voice and those without – are differentiated in the discourse (Philp 1985). Later, in the paper, the rules of the professional discourse on participation are identified as rule one, rule two, etc, however, this is not meant to suggest they are hierarchically ordered or in practise distinct. It is merely a formula for presenting and critiquing the hidden agenda of the dominant discourse.

### **Rehearsing the argument**

The argument made here is that we need to start rethinking the relationship between education and peoples' lives and how the two may interconnect. The terms in which the dominant discourse of participation is framed systematically reinforces one particular view about the relationship between life and learning. It is one in which participation in learning is professionally and institutionally controlled and, consequently, defined largely in vocational, instrumental and individual terms. It is this which needs opening up. As Benn argues

if learning is seen as a function of social relationships rather than as an essentially individual activity, then the concept of lifelong learning is extended beyond solely the acquisition by individuals of formal qualifications. Learning then ties in with a set of other relationships within organisations, families, communities and the economic sector. (1997: 31)

Education as a function of social relationships breaks with narrow, instrumental and vocational understandings of education. It widens our perception about where learning occurs and what might count as 'participation'. Also, it locates the 'learner' in a social context rather than as a isolated individual. This involves a shift of register from the individual to the collective. Educational purposes are linked with the nature of social

relationships rather than being defined in individual terms. Moreover, social relationships are embedded and constituted in a range of discourses – for example, of social class, of ‘race’, of gender and so on – in which knowledge/power come together in distinctive ways and benefit particular interests. Discourses do more than simply frame ways of talking. As knowledge/power formations they help pattern and sustain social relationships in society, how they are structured, who benefits from them and who loses by privileging particular understandings over others. We too are implicated in discourses which are knowledge/power formations. We cannot stand ‘outside’ of them. As educators, therefore, it is imperative to engage in both political and moral analysis about the discourses we are implicated in and the interests they serve.

Adult education, as a distinctively moral, political and educational discourse, has had a long history in social purpose and radical traditions in adult education. In the former, organizations like the Workers’ Educational Association were concerned with adult education for progressive reform and social change. In the radical tradition, popular struggles for equality, social justice and socialism were linked with the growth of the labour movement and other social movements. It was the aims of these movements that generated the purposes of education and it was through their activities that people educated themselves (Armstrong 1988).

A significant absence in the dominant discourse is an understanding of participation which draws on the experience of the social purpose and radical tradition. In a context where there is potential for greater participation in social and civic politics, as evidenced by the growth of social movements, reconnecting with radical ideas about participation in education can lead to rethinking the ‘problem of participation’ and its implications. We need to understand not only how the discourse of participation has generated knowledge but also excludes and limits what is known. A thorough critique is necessary and overdue and one that is critical of the ‘regime of truth’ which has been seeded, cultivated and harvested through the dominant professional discourse.

### **Rule one: participation is a ‘good thing’**

Adult education has often reflected a *social conscience* approach (see Williams in McIlroy and Westwood 1993) in which the adult educator has a missionary purpose to remedy the supposed deficiencies of people. This rescue motive unquestioningly assumes education to be a ‘good thing’ in that it not only equips people with skills but builds character too. Not surprisingly, therefore, studies of participation also start from the view that education is a ‘good thing’ which research and policy can further. Much research is, therefore, concerned with almost endlessly identifying and explaining significant differences in rates between different social groups of adult returners (Munn and McDonald 1988, Blair *et al.* 1995) and how participation can be furthered (Gooderham 1993).

If participation is a ‘good thing’ why do so few people recognize it as such? Bown addressing the issue of motivating adult learners, noted that involving more adults would require transforming the unwilling into the willing, adding the important caveat:

That of course requires us to be convinced that what we have to offer is really of some value to the currently unwilling, but I leave that uncomfortable thought for another day. (Bown 1989: 5)

This is an insightful and telling point. The boundaries of the dominant discourse are met but not crossed in this statement. Instead of questioning the professional wisdom about

what we offer as educators attention is directed towards how we can motivate more learners to participate in what is currently available. What has to be changed is the motivation of learners rather than the professional wisdom. Similarly, recent policy initiatives aimed at widening participation and creating a learning society (Kennedy 1997) start from the assumption that participation is a 'good thing'. The perspective taken here, however, is that we have to situate this claim in relation to educational and political purposes.

As Williams (in McIlroy and Westwood 1993) points out, adult educators have also been about developing *social consciousness*, rather than simply being motivated by a *social conscience*. In the former, adult education aims to help people to analyse the society they live in and how to change it. From this perspective, adult education's main role is to contribute to the process of social change. The purpose adult education serves, and who benefits from it, are key questions to ask before a 'premature ultimate' commitment to education as a universal good is made. The distinction between education for *social consciousness* and education as *social conscience* helps to clarify the underlying purposes and values of the two positions and the ways in which they construct 'participation'. In the former, it is linked with the wider activities of collectivities, of movements in society, in the latter, largely with individual recruitment into the education provided by institutions.

The ubiquity of the assumption that education is a 'good thing' may simply reflect the hegemony of a particular type of education and closure of debate about its purpose. We need to remind ourselves, or to restate, that education is an 'essentially contested concept' with legitimate alternative points of view about it (Gaillie, cited in Hartnet and Naish 1976). In other words, there are competing and conflicting ideologies about the purposes of adult education (Else 1986). Or, to put it another way, *social conscience* and *social consciousness* traditions in adult education may have claimed education to be a 'good thing' but without necessarily agreement about what is meant.

The second justification for taking the moral high ground concerns human agency and the type of choices we make. For adults, returning to learning implies a large degree of volition in the process i.e. because individuals decide to participate in their free time such choices are worthy of further encouragement and assistance. However, this issue may be more complex than it seems. A counter view is that we make choices but not always evenly; choices are constrained by the conditions under which they are made. Moreover, these conditions are never uniform or equal for different groups: course fees, dependent others, travel costs, children to look after, work demands and domestic pressures are all unevenly distributed and bear upon the real choices people have to make (Sargent *et al.* 1997).

In addition, the issue of choice raises considerations of power and authority. The assumption that participation in adult education is entirely voluntary may be to some extent mythical (Stalker 1993). There are adults who view their participation as being 'self determined' i.e. that it is a matter of their own will and effort. There are some who view it as 'other determined' i.e. dependent on the decisions made by more powerful individuals or groups. Yet Stalker also found in her research that people's capacity for 'self determination' often depended on the extent to which they could influence powerful others into facilitating some choices over others. The gap between learning opportunities which were 'self determined' and 'other determined' was often closer than it might seem. The issue of choice, or lack of it, were not as clear cut as it may seem and how people perceived it also differed. On the one hand, enabling learning opportunities could be seen as a privilege, as a favour bestowed by those in authority;

on the other, as an 'inescapable activity' undertaken because more powerful individuals or groups expect it to happen.

Associating participation with the moral high ground does, however, have more negative implications for how non-participants are viewed. Implicitly or explicitly, they are often denigrated in the literature as holding 'negative attitudes to learning' and therefore in need of rescue. And negative attitudes to learning are, by implication, negative attitudes to what is morally a better way to spend one's time. At best, non-participants may see learning in purely instrumental terms; at worst, they 'possess attitudes which cluster around money, basic needs gratifications, sheer habits, stimulus binding, neurotic needs, convention and...inertia and...doing what other people expect and demand' (Boshier, quoted in Ziegahn 1992: 31). The reality, however, is that the choices people have to make are never even in their consequences. If so, the implicit moral high ground assumed by the preference for education, over some other activity, is less self-evident.

### **Rule two: institutionalized monopoly-participation equals formal learning**

In many studies the meaning of participation is framed in terms of taking part in a course of study or a specific organized learning activity. More often than not these are accredited, certificated and provided according to market determined criteria. The 'problem of participation' is then posed in terms of 'solutions' which facilitate greater access to the learning opportunities available. However, there is more going on here than simply enhancing access. The way the problem and solution are defined reinforces a particular monopoly about what learning is, how it occurs and what purposes it serves.

Despite recognition of a large variety of informal and invisible learning (see Tough 1983, Sargant 1991, Beinart and Smith 1997, Tight 1998) which people engage in outwith institutions and without the assistance of recognized educators, the overall emphasis of the dominant discourse is on participation in institutionalized provision. By this is meant the learning organized by explicitly educational institutions as opposed to the informal learning e.g. learning arising from involvement in clubs, activities, movements etc.

In the institutionalized vision, it is easy to assume that low levels of participation reflect low levels of learning, or low levels of motivation for learning. It is participation in the courses of study, subjects and forms of knowledge deemed legitimate by these institutions which is, after all, regarded as significant education. What we know from the dominant discourse is that participation in its definition of learning is highly uneven. Yet, as Tight (1998) remarks about his study, which took a broad view of learning, it became very difficult to find someone who had not been actively learning! His claim highlights not only how the dominant discourse constructs participation but that it does so whilst reinforcing an institutionally controlled politics of knowledge. 'Real learning' is constructed in terms of a controlled space (e.g. buildings), time (e.g. timetables) and learning opportunities (e.g. curriculum) which are regulated by educational institutions. What people return to is a particular form of institutionalized education and the role of a professional class of educators who service it. As Foley (1994) comments, so intent have we been on constructing 'education' that we often fail to see learning.

Education, as Williams (1961) notes, involves a selective tradition which is partial and filters knowledge. This active process of selection systematically excludes the

meanings of a large section of the population from wider circulation as valid and worthy. The common culture of ordinary people is delegitimated by an educational system which denies access to the full range of meanings available in society. Of course, all curricula are inevitably socially constructed but the question is one about the basis of this selection and whose interests, concerns and values are legitimated or excluded in the process – it is in this process that a monopoly of relevant knowledges are constructed. And this is a ‘political’ rather than technical process. Invariably, as Thompson (1997) remarks, this privileges a ‘highly particular (i.e. dead, white, male, middle class and European) selection of knowledge and culture’. It refracts, if not reflects, their interests. Historically, education has always been ‘so saturated with class responses that it demanded an active rejection and despal of the language, customs, and traditions of received popular culture’ (Thompson 1968). Consequently, for many working-class people adult education is no different from their earlier experiences of schooling (Westwood 1980). The power of educational institutions to differentiate ‘useful’ from ‘really useful knowledge’ (Johnson 1988) divorces learning from social action and thus critical knowledge about acting to change society are delegitimated. The discourse of participation is, therefore, not only about access into educationally controlled spaces it also reaffirms a sanitized view about the purposes education serves.

However, it might be argued that the tendency to institutional monopoly is contradicted by developments in experiential learning, the growth of new educational technologies, distance learning and procedures such as the accreditation of prior learning. Are these not examples of a more democratic, pluralistic, learning process which both facilitates access and disperses control over the curriculum?

The growth in distance learning and new technologies (e.g. e-mail, video conferencing etc) which breakdown the requirement of traditional modes of study (e.g. attendance in a class) have to be seen in a market context of educational institutions reaching new ‘customers’. Whilst these trends have opened up a form of participation in educational provision (‘self-study’ and ‘independent learning’ replacing modes of interactive and collective learning) the logic of their development has more to do with reaffirming, rather than undermining, the dominant assumptions about control over definitions of educationally relevant knowledge. Some of these pedagogies, such as distance learning, can mean that the learning process is less open to the influence of more autonomous teachers or the collective body of students. A similar point has been made by Westwood (1980) about the Open University, a development which she claims illustrates the process of knowledge being commodified and the centripetal impact of such changes on teaching and the process of learning. Whilst facilitating access, these trends do not fundamentally alter the epistemological politics of educational institutions. It could also be claimed they have a downside by permitting such institutions to impregnate their values and expectations into new private domains. By implication the educative potential of ‘other’ spaces in public and private life are devalued or obscured. The logic of this process is that institutional borders are being redrawn rather than withdrawn.

On the surface, an interest in learning from experience seems to open up greater recognition of a diversity of learning that results from life activities. However, the reality is less clear cut. The mushrooming of interest in accrediting learning from prior experience has been a double-edged sword. It is important to make the distinction between the accreditation of prior learning (APL) derived from previously assessed and codified activities and those gained by accrediting prior experience of learning (APEL). The first can be highly reductive because it deals with learning already recognized by

institutions or competencies demanded by industries or professions. APEL is more open in that it recognizes the potential for transferable learning from a broad range of life activities to other contexts. Yet, as Fraser (1995) points out, identifying a range of transferable skills is not the same as a learning process which entails a critical analysis of 'who and why we are' and the constraints that helped to create us. The system of APEL still rigidly controls what experience is to be selected, valued and what is not. In other words, the logic of the process of accrediting prior experience tends to exclude education for critical intelligence. Also, as Edwards (1994) argues, the growth of interest in experiential learning during the ascendancy of the new right in the 1980s was part of a project aimed at undermining the professional autonomy of more 'progressive' education/training professionals by centrally controlling the outcomes of learning.

### **Rule three: learners are 'abstract' not 'socialized' individuals**

By focusing on adults returning to learning situations, the professional discourse of participation reproduces and reinforces particular assumptions and understandings about learners. They are seen as individuals abstracted from their membership of different groups rather than located as part of a wider body. Moreover, this individualizing of the learner is reflected in, and reinforced by, a process of education that is largely about selecting, categorizing and differentiating people according to their alleged merits. In contrast the learner as a 'socialized individual' (Miliband 1994) in which expressions of individuality are tempered by concerns for the common good or, indeed, where individuality is both a function and outcome of social interaction is ignored.

The taken-for-granted view that adult education is about the individual ignores the contested nature of what this means. Miliband's depiction of socialized individualism involves a person with a wider conscience prepared to act to achieve common goals beyond his or her own immediate interests, which points towards a view of the individual actively involved in the sphere of civil society, practising obligations and asserting rights along with others. In this view, individual fulfilment is combined with the larger demands of solidarity and concern for the public good. 'Socialized individualism', therefore, involves engagement in forms of learning and action through participation in civic associations and organizations and the role of education is to foster this. Historically, the concern for democracy and citizenship was the 'lodestone' for adult education practice (Merrifield 1997).

The dominant tradition in adult education is largely concerned with the individual abstracted from their wider context. The hidden curriculum of adult education reinforces a well intentioned but pragmatic and unproblematical common sense. This, of course, has political and ideological implications. As Keddie (1980) points out, adult education stresses individuality and personal development, rather than collective values, and thereby reinforces a middle-class value system. Adult education is also socially mediated, i.e. it can be seen by middle class groups as an appropriate way to spend leisure time and though the appeal to women is greater, the choices made often reaffirm their role in the domestic sphere rather than in public life. Whilst professing a student-centred curriculum, which might then be expected to produce diversity, the outcome is often very uniform and supportive of middle-class, rather than working-class, lifestyles. This itself may prove to be a sufficient deterrent to working class people. In



short, claims to student-centredness may express an alternative mode of control which is related to the expectations of learners held by tutors.

Adult education 'theory' is also being constructed out of a similar set of 'hidden' ideological assumptions which are consequently reinforcing the professional ideology of adult education. In andragogical theory (Knowles 1983) the importance of self-directed learning is asserted in that it seemingly captures the sense in which adults 'participate' in learning projects on their own initiative. The role of the educator in this perspective is more that of a facilitator rather than teacher. The learner as sovereign individual is augmented in andragogical theory. What it evades, however, is an analysis of the unequal relations between the needs individual learners subscribe to and those of more powerful educational institutions. It is only by assuming that no conflict of interest will emerge that the fiction of the individual as self-directing can be maintained. The technology of self-direction has little to say about the hegemonic forces which shape consciousness and the conditions in which 'self-direction' is possible. Neither has it anything to say about the importance of structural inequalities arising from class, race or gender and the role adult education may have in relation to the collective interests of such groups. For example, as Fraser (1995) notes, the learner in the andragogical model is highly gendered by being premised on a masculine model of self actualization. Self-direction for women then is doubly difficult: not only do they have to confront a patriarchal order but also one built into the model of what self-actualization means.

When adult education targets working class groups it often does so by pathologizing the learner as deficient or 'disadvantaged' individuals in need of remedial work, e.g. literacy. 'They' are the needy and are differentiated from 'we' the needs meeters, as Kirkwood (1990) points out. Thus, the working class is constructed as not fully sovereign individuals but in need of an injection of adult education to achieve parity. This deflects attention away from wider structures of inequality and reinforces the assumption that 'third-rate' curricula are necessary (Thompson 1997). Participating in learning is hidden behind a softly, friendly, happy experience to avoid difficulty and intellectual challenge. A process which can end up selling people short in terms of understanding the powerful forces that shape their lives.

Furthermore, it has been argued this process of constructing the individual in cultural and ideological ways is part of a political project of fragmenting potential sites of collective opposition to structural inequalities. Edwards (1991) suggests that 'autonomy within inequality' is reproduced through an emphasis on the individual provided with a quasi market of choice and flexibility of provision. The apotheosis of this system is the 'bespoke' learning programme and the educational supermarket. But markets are not neutral. The cultural and ideological power of this construction is furthered by the particular identity which the learner is assumed to possess – white, middle class identities which reinforce and draw from a wider cultural stock of meanings.

The dominant way of framing the learner cuts them off from the wider context of societal participation – who participates (and who is excluded), in what and to what effect. In this process adult education is divorced from the everyday life of people, how power shapes their experiences and their concerns. Is it any wonder that for many powerless groups adult education seems irrelevant? Participation in public policy has been a contentious issue and the debate about it has highlighted its role in incorporating dissenters rather than simply in redistributing power (Craig and Mayo 1995). In contrast, in the radical tradition of adult education, participation is treated problematically. From this perspective, the 'problem of participation' is one of mobilizing

resistance to dominant structures and values and adult education has played a small, but significant role, in this process. It is this tradition in which 'socialized individualism' has been resourced and supported, in particular, which has been eclipsed by the dominant discourse. The emergence of new social and urban movements since the 1960s has grown, nevertheless, in opposition to the 'old' movement of labour and the 'politricks' of institutionalized processes (Gilroy 1987). Such movements have relied more on popular protest and direct action of a 'personal and political' kind in order to create social change. For example, the womens' movement, the peace movement, the environmental movement, to name a few of the more important ones, have had a significant educative impact in the public sphere as well as in the private life of many individuals (for example, Barr 1999, Scandrett 1999). We need to learn from these movements. However, adult education is often outside of them and fails to connect with the potential they offer for a collective and critical pedagogy of learning.

Participation in adult education reaffirms learning as a form of 'abstract individualism' rather than a collective project in which 'social individuals' learn and act together. It focuses on individual motives, concerns and needs in terms which are institutionally recognized as educationally valid. The possibility that adults as (potential) learners may have collective interests is not part of the dominant discourse.

#### **Rule four: there are barriers to participation, not resistance**

Perhaps rather than set out to attract the non-participant we should engage with the non-participant. Perhaps we, the educators, are the non-participants in the worlds of many of our fellow country men and women. (Patrick 1989: 15)

There are competing accounts of why some groups participate and other do not. The dominant, 'motivation-barriers' approach has highlighted hurdles which are situational (e.g. child care), institutional (e.g. enrolment procedures) or dispositional (e.g. attitudes and expectations). The latter may amount to a 'blaming-the-victim' in terms of perceived hostility to education: non-participants are identified as 'lacking motivation or are indifferent to learning'; 'question the relevance of educational opportunities'; hold 'negative perceptions of education' and have 'individual, family or home problems', and so on (for example, Valentine and Darkenwald 1990). In contrast, the argument explored here is that it may be more useful to think of non-participation as part of an implicit 'culture of resistance' to mainstream educational values.

The dominant discourse has difficulty in conceptualising non-participation as a form of resistance. If education is a good thing, why should it be resisted? What does it imply about the non-participant? Are they mad, bad or both? What is ruled out is the idea of non-participation as an active, informed process. If non-participants' experiences of education have not been particularly good – which the evidence would imply – then why should they think it will be different second time round? Might not their refusal to participate be an active choice, informed by their previous experience? As Giroux points out:

Resistance...redefines the causes and meanings of oppositional behaviour by arguing that it has little to do with deviance and learned helplessness, but a great deal to do with moral and political indignation. (cited in Quigley 1992)

People resist for good reasons. Opening up the issue of power and culture raises the

possibility that non-participation could be theorised as a form of resistance. Resistance to power raises the question about what is being resisted and what form it takes. Clegg (1989) distinguishes two forms of resistance, one that attempts to create a new base of power and, two, resistance which involves a struggle to escape from power. This latter form of resistance is 'frictional' and may not necessarily involve overt, intended or direct conflict with power. It may be in these terms that we can locate non-participation in adult education. If so, the work on 'cultures of resistance' in secondary schooling by Willis (1977) and Hargreaves (1982), for example, which point to the very rational, even if ultimately unsuccessful, response of school pupils to the 'hidden curriculum', boredom and indignities of schooling may have a parallel in adult education.

There is a strong case for arguing that in its essential characteristics adult education is similar to other aspects of the educational system. Typically for working-class students the system constructs a sense of their inadequacy and failure; the middle-class bias of adult education reinforces the hegemony of the current order (Westwood 1980). This line of argument is developed in Quigley's (1992) account of non-participation as a form of resistance to the practice of adult literacy. He draws the distinction between the 'habitat of objectified lessons and the habitus of values and culture' in which education is provided. Whereas the 'habitat' of objectified learning may be acceptable to the resister if perceived as relevant, the 'habitus' of education – the culture and values it embodies – are rejected. In other words resistance is a matter of choice made by the learner. What this also points towards is the importance of an approach which builds its curriculum from the lived experience of the learners – from their habitus.

The claim of a parallel to cultures of resistance in schooling may be objected to on at least two accounts. First, adult educators might claim that the experience offered adults is very different from schooling. That is, participation in adult education is voluntary whereas schooling is not. Power, therefore, in this educational encounter is being freely entered into. However, as I have already argued, this issue is not as clear cut as is sometimes claimed in that different conditions, power and authority all have a bearing on the choices made. Second, pedagogically (or andragogically), it is claimed that the process of learning in adult education is distinctive in that adult learning requires a very different process, one that is fundamentally shaped by the need for adults to be self-directing. However, this claim is deeply problematic. As Collins points out:

self directed learning has emerged in the profession of adult education as an aspect of a constraining or disciplinary technology which forges, in the words of Michel Foucault, a 'docile body, that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved'. Learning experiences shaped by self directed learning methods are individualized in a way that ensures learners become wrapped up in their own *contracted* learning project and the mediated relationship moulded by the facilitator. (Collins 1991: 27)

Even if Collins is overstating the case, it is nevertheless difficult to support the contention that power relationships in adult education encounters are somehow transparent and therefore negligible.

It seems reasonable to surmise that many people find adult education unattractive and irrelevant to their daily lives. Despite many well intentioned efforts to attract people the sense of frustration felt by their failure to respond to what is offered is often evident. It is easy thereafter to assume people are 'apathetic' and have limited horizons. Redefining non-participation as a form of resistance may, however, open up the

possibility of rethinking what adult education is for and where it occurs. Perhaps we need to move towards the ‘habitat and habitus’ – in Quigley’s terms – where people come together and create their own structures, define their own interests and pursue what is valuable to them. If we started to think about participation in these terms then the problem of participation could be faced the right way round – that is, that adult education is part of the problem rather than simply the solution. Understanding participation in this way turns things on their head. This is the purpose of this paper, to substantiate the need for a different hypothesis about the relation between participation and adult education.

### **Conclusion: the collective learning iceberg hypothesis**

The discourse of participation has become one of professional self-justification and consequently a self-fulfilling prophecy in which the problem of participation is always located in ‘the other’. In this sense, it pathologizes the ‘victims’ or the ‘problems’ of the system. Questions of why people should participate are substituted by technical considerations of how it can be furthered. Yet, participation is an ambivalent and ambiguous idea which can be used to incorporate and manage dissenters rather than being a means of challenging power and inequality. Before assuming it to be a universal good we need to contextualize it: participation for what? Whose interests does it serve? Who benefits? What are the consequences? We need to locate participation in historically and contextually specific ways. Yet it is precisely this type of analysis that the discourse of participation rules out.

The dominant discourse has sanitised participation ‘as if’ it could be divorced from a more contentious analysis of ‘the politics of participation’ (e.g. Croft and Beresford 1992). By depoliticizing participation alternative ways of thinking about and developing education through collectivities in struggle is overlooked. What this reveals, however, is the extent to which more fundamental questions about the contribution adult education can make to the lives of people has been closed. Yet, as Courtney (1981) rightly points out, ‘the notion of participation then is not to be confined to the area of education but must be seen against a broader, and more significant, matrix which we might call “societal participation”’. However, few studies seem to have taken this advice. Deconstructing the discourse of participation in adult education can open this debate up.

Having said that, the dominant discourse has also provided some illuminating work about the type of learning people engage in voluntarily (Tough 1983). The hidden ‘learning iceberg’ refers to learning projects people systematically engage in outside educational institutions or recognized learning programmes. They are often invisible and occur without the involvement of professional educators. Whilst Tough’s research broke new ground it also stayed firmly within the dominant discourse by focusing on the *individual* nature of peoples’ learning projects. The hypothesis of this study involves extending his insight to *collective* learning arising from experiences gained in social, cultural and political activities. In this perspective, participation is located in the struggles people engage in to transform, modify or influence the conditions in which they live.

By shifting our attention to a more politicized experience of participation the relationship between it and the radical tradition of adult education becomes visible. A tradition in which the educative experience of groups in struggle creates a context and

pedagogy for sustained and critical learning efforts – the hypothesis of this account. As Benn (1997) notes, what has been missing from the debate is the ‘under researched issue of the relationship between education and social activity’. In this view, the educative nature of social activity generates its own ‘curriculum’ which may be systematized if we find ways, as adult educators, to participate in it.

The professional discourse of participation has been narrowly conceived. It is cut off from the rich history of social purpose adult education and the educative role of collectivities in struggle which characterized the radical tradition. This weakens our current understanding of the possibilities for educational practise. Instead, we continue to plough the same old furrows which, increasingly, sheds little more light on the subject of participation. A discourse of diminishing returns has been the result.

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