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Pedagogy for the Economically Privileged: “Tuning In” to the Privileged Learner

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Abstract: *Today’s activists are challenged by the sheer scope of losses by social movements. We have lost most significant battles and have moved into a defensive position struggling to retain earlier gains in social policy. The gap between rich and poor continues to widen, and it is clear that we need new allies in the struggles for justice. The middle class has been eyed as potential allies, with the hope that in bringing their resources, information, and power to bear, progressive social change will result. This paper draws from dissertation research on a pedagogy for the privileged: research that involves transformative educators with more than five years of experience. It documents one educational strategy to assist in this transformation, that of “tuning in” to the privileged learner. Popular education has provided the framework for emancipatory and transformative education for the last three decades. Its emphasis on reaching marginalized learners has created challenges for adult educators as it does not speak to the experience of educating privileged learners. Hence the search for such a context-specific pedagogy has pragmatic potential for the field of transformative pedagogy.*

Keywords: pedagogy, privilege, transformative education

Introduction

Inequality presents itself as a moral and ethical issue as well as a political, social and economic one. In order to bridge this divide, we must better understand what is required of the economically privileged to become “conscientized” about class and to become committed to change. Inherently the process is difficult – pedagogy for privilege is an emotional minefield as it “excavates the ground [learners] stand on” (Bell and Griffin 1997, p. 50). While different forms of transformative education (namely anti-racism, feminism, labour and social justice education) have addressed this issue with varying degrees of success, we know most clearly that the area of class continues to be taboo, even in coalitions and among many transformative educators:

Many citizens of this nation, myself included, have been and are afraid to think about class... As a nation, we are afraid to have a dialogue about class even though the ever-widening gap between rich and poor has already set the stage for ongoing and sustained class warfare... It is in our interests to face the issue of class, to become more conscious, to know better so that we can know how best to struggle for economic justice... I have [often] chosen gender or race as a starting point. I choose class now because I believe class warfare will be our nation’s fate if we do not collectively challenge classism, if we do not attend to the widening gap between the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-nots. (bell hooks, 2000, p. vii)

In Canada and elsewhere, economic inequality is rising – a result of market dynamics that increasingly provide surging incomes for the top 10-20% and a diminishing share of the pie as one slips down the income ladder (Curry-Stevens, 2001). Increases in corporate executive salaries outpace those of their workers, drawing fire from all concerned with broader societal issues. Profound life-altering changes are resulting as our social ills become “the toxic fruit of a poisoned tree” (Abdullah, 1999, p.38). The ongoing practices of exclusion and exploitation fuel the

flames of oppression, especially when “I dissociate my progress from your pain” (Abdullah, p.38).

Class privilege is both an absolute and a relative concept – when one compares oneself to the population as a whole, one’s economic location holds certain power and access to resources. From a Marxist perspective, one’s relationship to the owners of production is the key fixed attribute of class identity. From a more nuanced understanding of class, there are considerable ways in which the non-elite are privileged. Those in the middle class can be seen as privileged due to their comparative advantage with the poor and the working poor. They are also agents of the status quo, both in their demand for consumer goods and in their cultural collusion with the dominant hegemony. It is within this framework that the middle class is targeted as potential privileged allies for economic justice.

Theory and Research Design

The theory base for this research is imbedded within the existing pedagogical literature that specifically addresses privilege, namely anti-racism, feminism, labour and social justice education. The field of anti-racism practice is most developed in this area, since authors over the last 15 years have been addressing how whites can and should become involved in anti-racist practice as well as how white racial identity has been formed. Recognizing that the problem of racism rests legitimately with the agents of oppression, the privileged whites, their role in its dismantling is taken seriously. This perspective is beginning to be felt in other fields. To date, no educational research has focused on building class consciousness with privileged adult learners.

Mezirow’s theory of transformation provides some helpful insights into a pedagogy for the privileged, but several steps are required to re-orient this work. First, it needs to be contextualized for pedagogy (focusing on the educator instead of the learner), and it needs to be assessed for its pragmatic application to working with privileged learners. It also needs to be politicized, that is, placed in a social justice and social action context that acknowledges that the educator has goals about how graduates make use of their increased awareness. Fortunately, the insights of Schugurensky (2002) and Parks Daloz (2000) assist in this contextualization and re-orientation. Further steps are still required, especially in developing concerted focus on educating the privileged.

I will replicate the conclusions uncovered in the literature review so as to provide a synthesis of what is known about the transformation process from a social justice pedagogical perspective. Please remember that some of these items are less certainly known than others. While these items may look simplistic and rather obvious, know that they are each supported by a range of researchers investigating the practice of a pedagogy for the privileged:

- Learners need to be motivated to go through this process, either through pre-existing motivation or induced through the education process. This motivation takes four forms: empathy, ethical beliefs, spiritual values and self-interest.
- The process is historically imbedded in popular education (Freire, 1967) and includes the “conscientization” whereby the learner becomes aware of the systemic issues related to both oppression and dominance.
- The task for privileged learners to becoming aware of privilege is more difficult and volatile than that of oppressed learners becoming aware of their oppression.
- Cognitive restructuring is required to reinterpret the learner’s experience from one of merit and deservedness to one of luck and happenstance. Each element of inaccurate beliefs about one’s own identity and the role of one’s group needs to be redefined.

- The emotional demands are significant and require considerable attention in the transformation process. Punctuated have been the following: guilt, shame, fear, anger, despair, loss and grief.
- Resistance must be recognized as a natural part of the process and treated carefully.
- The transformation process never really ends; we are at best “in recovery” from dominance.
- The process, when applied, needs to consider supplemental theories about the nature of change: the intellectual development process (Perry, 1967) and group development processes (Peck, 1987).

My perspective of this literature is that it is insightful in certain components of the educational process (such as a rough understanding of the transitions for learners, the motivation for change, the emotional process for learners, and the cognitive processes for learners) but relatively shortsighted in others (such as the interplay between educator and learner processes, the overlay of group dynamics and cognitive development, the role of resistance, the competing needs of privileged and oppressed as they exist in mixed groups, the tensions between individual and group needs, the combining of insights into a learner-centered model and measurement and evaluation of individual learning). The literature also fails to navigate the waters of attracting privileged learners to such learning environments, and the companion requirement to overcome their fear and/or complacency.

This research study marks the first published findings from my dissertation research. It draws from qualitative interviews with 3 transformative educators situated in community settings, all of whom practice in educational environments that combine learners with diverse identities. This paper speaks specifically to the experience of assisting the middle class become aware of their economic privilege, in relationship to both consumers of services in their workplaces and with others in their communities, such as janitors and food servers. It also draws from two workshops held on this topic with approximately 40 community and academic educators.

Research participants have consistently raised issues that need to be reflected upon during their preparation as educators. These concerns are theoretical, pragmatic and emancipatory, stemming from how they understand their own agency and that of their learners. It is this body of findings, contextualized in the context of education with the economically privileged, that form the basis of this paper.

Research Findings

The most immediate finding of this research is the pressing need for educators to prepare adequately for the task. The concept of “tuning in” (Shulman, 1992) is the process by which educators anticipate the needs of privileged learners, attending to both cognitive and emotional needs as they enter an educational setting. The linked task is to attend to the needs of the educator and prepare oneself for the intellectual, emotional and spiritual elements of practice.

Drawing both from the research and from documented practice in the field, there is an emerging imperative for educators to be better prepared for educating privileged learners and for reflecting on their own issues related to this pedagogy. Without such “tuning in,” transformative educators are inclined to underestimate the difficulty of this work, to overlook its significance and be more vulnerable to reacting to the emotions of privileged learners with irritation and anger, and more inclined to enter win-lose interactions with them. Without “tuning in” to the self, the educator will be inadequately prepared to respond with integrity and sensitivity.

As Shulman advises, “tuning in” is required to help the practitioner build empathy for their learners. It is both an intuitive and a methodical process of anticipating the range of possible reactions of the learner, and expanding our understanding of the likely reactions that a learner will face in entering an educational environment. How will privileged learners feel joining this program? What concerns might they have in walking into the room? What will it be like to be a privileged learner in this group? Will they be reviled or supported by the educator?

We then need to remember the nature of the transformative task that is before these learners. The nature of the transformative task is significantly different for privileged and non-privileged group members as privileged learners need to “excavate the ground they stand on” (Bell and Griffin, 1997, p. 50) as they unearth the false foundations for their understanding of both the world and their position within it. Issues such as their own achievements and the degree of responsibility their identity holds for such achievements (their own and that of their group), how they interpret the failure of others to achieve, and the role that they and their group have played in upholding the privilege/oppression dynamic. This material is primarily cognitive, yet there are significant emotional responses to the shift in awareness and perceptions.

The significance of this transformative transition can be life-shattering for the privileged learner who needs to re-evaluate and re-configure their cognitive appreciation for her/his life. For the economically privileged, the transition needs often to recognize the exploitation that led to their family’s accumulation of wealth, often on the backs of people of colour. It will necessitate an awareness of colonization, theft of aboriginal lands, slavery, land grants, euro-centrism, voting rights, racist and classist institutions, wage exploitation, occupational segregation, tax expenditures, tax cuts, social program cuts and even macro-economic policy that has favored investors over wage earners. Collectively, initiatives such as these formalize and entrench the privileged, typically at the expense of the marginalized.

It is thus immensely compelling to recognize resistance (including minimization, deflecting and even outright denial) within privileged learners as natural, preservation-oriented and appropriate given the transformation that we ask of them. If they embrace the alternative paradigm that we propose, they will likely become less comfortable in their own skin as well as in the relationships around them, including their work and familial roles. Even though we rarely anticipate these outcomes, the privileged learner who becomes an ally in the struggle for social justice may encounter extreme dissonance if they stay in their present relationships. It is almost as though they can intuit such requirements before they enter the process. Through this lens, resistance is quite a glorious and formidable tool for self-preservation.

Transformative educators need to be prepared for the intellectual, emotional and spiritual demands of the work. The intellectual task requires an identification of the cognitive changes required. While most social justice education has focused on the devastating impacts of oppression, in this work we need to turn our attention to the impacts of privilege. Specifically, the educator must anticipate evidence of privilege bestowed on the learner with middle class and elite incomes. What are the specific ways in which they are likely to have benefited from their identity? The list will approximate that generated a few paragraphs earlier, listing the affirmative bestowal of benefits on the kin of economically privileged learners. This is a time for collecting evidence, for being able to prove the existence of unfair practices of privilege.

The specifics of how to emotionally support privileged learners is still in development. For now, it is important to recognize the complexity of these emotions and that the learner may experience grief in the process of growth: “Yesterday one thought in simpler ways, and hope and aspiration were imbedded in those ways” (Perry, 1968, p. 157). Educators need to prepare them-

selves emotionally for this work, both to provide concrete support as well as providing effective role modeling. Committing to a process of deep reflexivity can assist such practice.

Educators have always served as role models for their learners. The pedagogy for the privileged is no exception, especially since the research has asserted that the transformation process is life-long in nature, and, at best, we are “in recovery” from classism (Bishop, 1994, p. 97). The educator provides living proof of the concept of privileged awareness and its pervasive nature. Being able to articulate this process and share the details of our own recovery, including the elements against which we still struggle, is critical modeling for the learner.

A related task is being able to articulate one’s own complicity with the status quo, and how the educator is currently attempting to resist such conformity. Educators revealed deep and profound struggles in what they feel called to “give up.” Bluntness punctuated such discussions with educators: “Do you need to give up your salary? Are we retaining our privilege if we don’t give up our salary?” From others, I heard the lines drawn more clearly: “I don’t want to be poor.”

Please note that this was articulated as a dynamic unique to class privilege. When considering other forms of privilege, it was clear that there was no possibility of giving up whiteness or maleness, although certainly there were perplexing issues when considering how to live differently in the world.

Turning to the learners, the issue was similarly complex, as questions are posed by learners about the nature of the changes being sought. The essence of the query is: “How far do you want me to go?” While it appears that both educators and learners are looking for answers outside of themselves, they can quite easily be re-directed to look inwards for the answers to these questions. Appropriately reframing the issue requires the questions to become, “What do you have to give up to live as congruently as possible with your values?”

Finally, the educator must educate from a position of hopefulness, having access to a source of inspiration that might be able to encourage learners through their places of despair. The educator must believe that the work of the privileged learner will be liberating and emancipatory, that there will come benefits from her/his involvement in the process. Goodman (2001) has documented the costs of oppression to privileged people including psychological, social, intellectual, moral and spiritual, and material and physical costs. There are correlated benefits that come from dismantling systems of privilege, at both a societal and individual level.

Drawing from the educator’s own spiritual practice will supplement her/his own educational practice. A pedagogy of the privileged needs to recognize our innate humanness, even within those who have distanced themselves from those who are oppressed. Also, the educator needs to be able to identify forms of social change that are inspirational and hopeful. Whether the process of transformation itself is sufficient for creating such hope since it leads to social responsibility (as profiled by Mezirow, 2000) or whether there are forms of social action that evoke hope (such as specific social movement achievements), the educator needs to believe that change is possible and that there are encouraging signs in evidence around the world. There may be times that the educator needs to publicly articulate these beliefs.

And yet, the educator needs to be bluntly honest with themselves about the changes they are seeking with their learners. Is there a hidden agenda? Perhaps hopefulness that learners will join particular social movements or become organizational allies? Will it be possible to accept the learner who decides to not make any changes to their lifestyle, or who might decide to give more to charity? Within each of us are beliefs about the nature of change. Imbedded in these beliefs are perspectives about desirable forms of “giving up.” As one educator put it,

If giving up is not part of some concerted, orchestrated, systematic process, it is just a drop in the ocean... I don't want to discredit how every little bit is meaningful but the societal impact that we would like this giving up to achieve is not likely to occur... Restructuring and reorganizing people's privilege would be a better aim than simply giving it away.

With adequate preparation, rigorous self-reflection and authentic disclosure, transformative educators can "tune in" to the needs of privileged learners and better assist in their transformation into allies. Educators must be patient people, with the fortitude to believe they are making a difference even if its impact might not be visible for years to come.

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