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Abstract

Inspired by the idea of a hegemonic relationship among forms of knowledge, this paper considers how a social structure that allows only certain, largely Westernized, forms of knowledge to be exalted could affect adult learners, particularly women. As certain forms of knowledge have historically conferred privilege, university degrees have become markers not just of knowledge but also power and social legitimacy. Additionally, knowledge learned in classroom settings, especially higher education settings, has been favored over knowledge gleaned through life experience, which functions to exclude people of lower socioeconomic status and marginalize forms of knowing more commonly associated with female adult learners. The instructional methods encountered in higher education limit the full participation of adult learners by excluding experiential knowledge from the discourse and reinforcing Westernized, modern models of educational advancement. Through the framework of Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Laura Rendon's *Sentipensante*, this paper examines how two different systems, limited educational tracks for adult learners and modes of instruction that discount experiential learning, work together to restrict female adult learners.

Adult learners face challenges on two fronts. First, institutions often assume that adult learners are interested only in career-based curricula rather than in the liberal arts. As such, a whole industry of for-profit colleges is ready to assume these learners are attending school for the sole purpose of gaining a degree to become more employable; the possibility that adult learners could pursue higher education for their own enjoyment or intellectual development is rarely considered. The implication that intellectual exploration is for the young involves a degree of ageism as well as a form of classism rooted in the belief that later-in-life college students should be appreciative of any knowledge they can get. The notion that many of these degrees have a female majority further the divide by reinforcing these gendered assumptions about what kinds of knowledge women are interested in pursuing.

The second challenge is that in the classroom, instructors may discount the experience-based knowledge that female adult learners bring to the classroom, and instead are intent on instructing adult learners as though they are, to borrow John Locke's term, "*tabula rasa*"—a blank slate.

Nothing could be further from the truth. While adult learners might be behind their other classmates in terms of academic study, they have knowledge gained from years of working in their communities, potentially raising children, and possibly from their experiences living in other countries. When the academy excludes this knowledge from legitimate academic discourse, it reinforces a hierarchy where only institution-based knowledge counts.

Adult learners, especially women in this role, can be best served in education through two changes: first, an institutional recognition that adults are not solely interested in acquiring employable skills, and second, the intentional inclusion of the experiential knowledge that female adult learners bring to the classroom. In this way, adult learners can more fully experience the liberating power of education, rather than a more narrowly defined version of training.

Who are Adult Learners?

It is important to qualify who we are describing when we use the term “adult learners”. While the traditional college student is 18-22, and has been enrolled in school consistently since kindergarten, other college students are either returning to school or beginning their higher education later in life. More than 43% of community college students are over the age of 24 (Chaves, 2006), which suggests that “nontraditional” students are now more of a mainstream segment of higher education.

When adults decide to “go back to school”, it is often because they have exhausted the job prospects available to them at their current level of education. While some adults will enroll in traditional four-year colleges, many look for a more expedient way to attain a degree, especially if they are concerned about childcare. For-profit colleges, often advertised in subway cars, tend to highlight how quickly a student can progress from enrollment to an exciting new career. As such, these adults may choose a program with limited scope— instead of a bachelor’s degree, they may opt for certification as an ultrasound tech, paralegal, dental hygienist, or other roles that are traditionally performed by women. While these jobs are all useful to society, they have more in common with training than educating. Such programs raise an important question: where are the transferable skills that allow for intellectual and employment mobility? Can an

ultrasound tech later become a journalist or teacher, or does the structure of her degree program confine her to a single occupational track? The programs are limited to role-specific training rather than providing a broad base of knowledge and a facility with questioning social systems, reinforcing a narrow definition of what adult learners are presumed to be capable of doing.

Additionally, many of these advertisements are misleading. While “web developer” is advertised as a two-year program, how many web developers in demand today actually became employable through a two-year program? Many students find that after going into debt and taking out usurious loans, they are left with a useless “degree” and no support system to help them network and find jobs, highlighting how “access” without legitimacy can actually continue a system of inequality rather than disrupt it.

Community college is a more affordable and less pernicious alternative. If students complete two years at community college, they are able to transfer to a four-year college or university where they have more academic options and curricula open to them. After completing a bachelor’s degree, the path is open for these students to pursue graduate work in a field of their choosing. Some of the advertisements appealing to returning adult learners suggest that if they are interested in helping patients, they can become a medical technician. Why do we advertise “medical technician” on the subway, but not “doctor”? Why do we limit—from the very beginning!—a career path for adult learners? Who benefits from limiting these students’ educational trajectories?

History of Higher Education for Nontraditional Students

While higher education used to be reserved for young men, in the twenty-first century the student body has shifted toward a female majority (Dey & Hurtado, 2005). In addition, the

increased number of older students entering college for the first time has created a need for “child care services, reentry services, women’s centers, women’s studies, and the incorporation of gender-related issues in the classroom” (Dey & Hurtado, 2005). The need for these services, however, does not mean that they are widely available on college campuses. The university system has been slow to adapt to a changing student body. According to Gumport & Chun (2005), “the university emerged during medieval times, it has not changed dramatically since then; in many ways, it reflects the past.” This suggests that institutional structures continue to privilege “traditional” students and their trajectories.

What, then, could help the new class of adult, female learners access higher education? The growing number of online colleges, or online programs run by established universities, have increased access, especially for adult students whose work and childcare schedules might prohibit attendance during a traditional school day. While still new in terms of the history of higher education, the question of “what constitutes legitimate higher education” continues to follow these programs and their graduates (Gumport & Chun, 2005). Increased access to programs that do not carry the same social and professional legitimacy could prove to be another way in which adult female learners are affected by their options. Online programs that do not offer the same entrée into the workforce but instead produce trained workers may benefit employers more than the students and employees themselves. Instead of engaging learners and educating adult students so that they can create knowledge, they are instead “producing a workhorse that can be retrained to contend with the changing requirements of the workplace”—a valuable resource for employers but not necessarily for the students themselves (Gumport & Chun, 2005). Access, in this case, seems conditional; learners are welcomed as long as their education serves the demand of the market.

Historically, there have been higher education options available for students (traditional and nontraditional age) who are seeking certifications or degrees that will place them on the most expedient path to employment or improved employment. The nineteenth century saw one particular “area of exceptional growth: the professional education and certification of teachers” (Thelin, 2004). The “normal schools” of the 19th century are an example of higher education functioning primarily as career training. These schools, later called “teacher’s colleges,” trained young women (and men) to be teachers in the growing public-school systems of the United States (Thelin, 2004). While certainly a step up into a more knowledge-based career path, this environment was established to fill a need in the employment sector, rather than to provide students with broader academic opportunities. At times, the normal schools were not even considered traditional institutions of higher education. According to Thelin, “the history of the normal schools is confusing because it is not always clear how they were classified in the educational taxonomy. At times they were lumped with secondary schools. At other times they were considered a distinct category within higher education. Finally, at some universities they were seen as one of the academic tracks” (2004). This ambiguity serves to position the recipients of these degrees as a separate and possibly less-revered group, showing how the classification of the institution itself can determine whose knowledge is valued.

Even schools that were not specifically created to produce teachers for the youth of America were used as such by students who wished to join the job market as soon as possible. According to Thelin (2004), “well over 90 percent of the college’s students between 1880 and 1900 opted to end their studies after two years. This was not indicative of academic failure. Rather, pragmatic students, primarily those from impoverished backgrounds, stayed just long enough to complete their L.I. (license of instruction) certificate, which would allow them to gain

immediate employment as public school teachers, even without the bachelor of arts degree.” The students obtained their certificate with the minimum of tuition paid, and the job market gained their employees without having to pay the premium for a graduate with a bachelor of arts degree. In this case, higher education functioned less as a place of intellectual expansion and more as a method of labor preparation.

This path—higher education leading to specialized employment—is one that has continued to persist in America. The shorter degrees found at community colleges and online programs are simply a more recent example. Employers will also sometimes pay for employees to continue their education if the knowledge or certificate earned will directly contribute to the employee’s performance. “From the perspective of the employers, workers need to update their knowledge and skills to adapt to rapid technological changes in the workplace” (Gumport & Chun, 2005). The idea of education as a road to immediate usefulness is one that is both capitalistic and potentially exploitative, especially when it is disproportionally marketed to adult women seeking stability.

For adult female learners who choose to pursue traditional four-year degrees, there have also historically been impediments. While the twentieth century saw some advances in coeducational university spaces, “admission into the college or university hardly precluded segregation within the walls. Tracking into particular courses and majors, discouragement from some fields, and, above all, exclusion from extracurricular organizations and activities were the disappointing realities of coeducation” (Thelin, p. 98). Although college-level instruction became available to women, the status conferred by the degree was tainted by these nontraditional students’ exclusion from the guidance, mentorship, and networking afforded to male students. Without these, the degree was worth more than independent study, but less than

the degrees earned by traditional male students in the job market, showing that formal access to education does not necessarily translate into equal participation in its social and intellectual power structures.

Who Holds Knowledge?

The answer to this question lies in historical examples of how power and knowledge are intertwined. One explanation is that to continue to stay in power, the educated and powerful elite need to keep privileged knowledge for themselves. Aimé Césaire writes that the ruling body seeks to continue to oppress the subaltern, and that, instead of a true education, “in a parody of education, [they implement] the hasty manufacture of a few thousand subordinate functionaries, ‘boys,’ artisans, office clerks, and interpreters necessary for the smooth operation of business” (2000, p.6). The goal is never to educate these adults, it is to make them effective tools for the continued operation of business, while making them think they have achieved a higher status. In this way education becomes a mechanism of control rather than liberation.

Paolo Freire contends that to truly have the oppressed (here, the uneducated) learn and be free, the pedagogy must be inclusive. If the pedagogy is created entirely by the oppressors, it will not liberate. We may consider the example of for-profit colleges, which disproportionately target nontraditional students, and award them degrees of limited use or value. A woman in her forties might get a “degree” that says she has a certain skill set, but has she learned how to theorize or challenge current thought? Or has she merely memorized a certain number of things to be considered competent in a narrowly defined role? How valuable is her education if the industry she has her “degree” in becomes obsolete? Are there other intellectual or professional uses for it, or has her knowledge been structurally confined from the outset?

The difference between education and training is critical to understanding the answers to these questions. If a student has contributed to his or her own learning, the education is more sound. If the student is a receptacle, he or she has merely been trained. Training prepares a student for compliance, while education provides them with agency.

According to Freire, the pedagogy of the oppressed “must be forged with, not for, the oppressed” (2000, p. 48). Adult students must be active participants in their own education. If they sit in classrooms merely to parrot the words of others, they cannot be truly learning. Freire writes that “no pedagogy which is truly liberating can remain distant from the oppressed by treating them as unfortunates and by presenting for their emulation models from among the oppressors” (2000, p. 52). When the academy prepares adult learners to imitate previously established knowledge rather than contribute to it, it continues the same hierarchies it (ostensibly) seeks to undo.

If taken a step further, we could say that if there is a system of cultural oppression, colonization, or hegemony present, all efforts to learn could be compromised. Linda English and Peter Mayo found that “counter-hegemonic approaches to adult education... emphasised the validity of subaltern knowledge that had been devalued by colonialists” (2012, p. 70). To engage in a counter-hegemonic learning experience, adult students will have to bring their own subaltern knowledge to the conversation within the academy.

Antonio Gramsci wrote about the ways in which dominant groups can exercise their power over the subaltern. They can withhold literacy (or access to education), which is an overt method of hegemony, but even more insidiously, they can extend it in a *limited* way. He believed that by extending literacy, the dominant group can further subordinate the subaltern by creating the illusion of upward mobility and access to knowledge. “But the knowledge that counts—

privileged knowledge—will remain the property of a few” (Noddings, 2016, p. 73). Thus, the dominant group can appear to invite the dominated group to the learning table, but only in a way that does not effectively change their place in the social structure. The newly-minted medical technicians and CRNs can wear scrubs and be on the care team, as long as they are not there to argue treatment that is “out of scope”. Credentialing here functions as a way to create inclusion in a managed way, without truly granting epistemic equality.

Dominant Culture in the Academy

Nel Noddings, discussing Joel Spring’s theory of multicultural education, questions how we can discuss the dominant and dominated groups in the academy today. She notes that “these labels might be acceptable in American schools when discussing the period of European world colonization, but when ‘dominant’ is used to describe white American culture in today’s world, objections are voiced.” (2016, p. 209). Neither the dominant group (here, the academy) or the dominated group (here, nontraditional learners) would want to think of themselves in those roles. In this way, the dominant, unequivocal voice of the academy may continue to shape which forms of knowledge are recognized as rigorous, objective, or worthy.

This dismissal of knowledge is a form of oppression. Aimé Césaire writes that “I am talking about millions of men torn from their gods, their land, their habits, their life-from life, from the dance, from wisdom. I am talking about millions of men in whom fear has been cunningly instilled, who have been taught to have an inferiority complex, to tremble, kneel, despair, and behave like flunkys” (2000, p.43). Their lack of voice stems not from their lack of wisdom, but from their inability to express it in a hegemonic climate. For example, even if an adult female learner has already raised children and grandchildren, she might feel compelled to

base her responses to coursework in an early childhood education program solely on the printed course material, and not her own lived experiences. Her experiential knowledge becomes secondary to the authority of the institution, even when it is directly relevant to the subject at hand.

In *Sentipensante (sensing/thinking) Pedagogy*, Laura Rendon (2014) discusses the privileging of what is considered to be academic and impartial knowledge over the intuitive knowledge commonly associated with subaltern groups (here, the female adult learner). She contends that the external “scientific” form of knowledge is preferred, even when the subject being studied is something philosophical in nature, such as religion. “Even fields such as religion and philosophy... tend to keep inner learning at arm’s length and usually retain an intellectual, theoretical orientation” (2014, p. 27). Inner learning, knowledge derived from reflection and lived experiences, cannot be easily commodified or standardized, and is therefore often regarded as inferior.

Rendon further argues how “non-Western views of truth as espoused by third world perspectives, as well as indigenous knowledge, are at best objectified as the other and, at worst, as primitive and anti-intellectual” (2014, p. 42). Because of this biased value system, a student’s knowledge could be dismissed because it is not the knowledge preferred by that community or that educational setting. In this way, decades of experience with children can be dismissed as unscientific, even when they represent sustained lived engagement with the subject that is being studied. The hierarchy of knowledge once again becomes reinforced, and only knowledge that resembles the dominant forms of knowing is permitted to count as knowledge at all.

Adult Learners in the Classroom

As more adults pursue higher education that was not available to them earlier in life, universities must examine which kinds of knowledge will dominate the classroom. In her essay “The Learner, the Teacher, and the Classroom Community”, Karen Trujillo (2017) examines the disconnect between the nontraditional adult student’s life knowledge, and the academic knowledge privileged by the institution. The perception that the older student’s experiential learning would not be valued lead many of these older students to decline to “participate in conversations or interact with fellow students until near the end of the semester unless forced to do so during activities” (2017, p. 92). In this context, silence becomes a rational response to epistemic marginalization.

The knowledge gleaned throughout years in the business community could seem less legitimate than peer-reviewed sources. For example, a woman who has volunteered in her own children’s schools for a decade might not be afforded the same credibility as a scholarly article about the modern classroom. The message the student receives is that lived experiences must be translated into “academic language” before it can be heard.

Christopher Chaves (2006), citing Rendon (1994), asserts that “one of the best ways to accord a sense of mattering to adult students is through active forms of validation, both within and outside the classroom”. For adult students to become genuine participants in the construction of their own pedagogy, in a Freireian sense, their knowledge must be validated. These students can “use their experiences as a reservoir of knowledge” to both complement and challenge the learning materials in the classroom (Chaves, 2006). According to Chaves, this validation must extend beyond acknowledgement; the adult students’ experiential knowledge should be incorporated into the curriculum as a legitimate learning resource for the class, rather than

treating it as anecdotal. Only then can the classroom shift from a site of managed inclusion to a space of shared knowledge production.

Women as Nontraditional Students

In examining the composition of adult students, it should not go unnoticed that the majority of this student population is female (Hardin & Barefoot, 2008). These older, female students are entering higher education among other significant life transitions, such as job loss or divorce, and are doing so primarily to better provide for their families (Hardin & Barefoot, 2008). Their return to the classroom is therefore not only an academic decision, but also an economic one, shaped by gendered expectations of care. Since many of these adult learners are women with decades of life experience to share, institutions of higher education should reconsider not only access but also how knowledge is defined and validated within the classroom.

Chaves, (citing Belenky et al., 1986) argues that “when women experience subjective knowledge, they begin to rely on personal and professional ontologies-or nature of experience--as a source of knowledge.” Personal narratives and subjective knowledge, though not traditional elements of post-secondary discourse, are valuable learning tools in the education of female adult learners. Yet within hegemonic academic structures, such knowledge is often categorized as anecdotal rather than essential.

Women are not the only learners who benefit from experiential learning. Chaves, using Knowles’ idea of andragogy, the teaching of adults, (as opposed to pedagogy, which is teaching children), recommends “drawing upon a growing reservoir of student experience as a learning tool” (2006). Using experience as a valued form of knowledge, and incorporating students’

experiential knowledge into the discourse, allows adult students to participate in the construction of their own learning. Such an approach challenges the hierarchical idea that legitimate knowledge originates from the instructor and flows to the students.

Finally, Chaves concludes that, “experiential learning assumes that learning is a process, not an outcome; that learning is best facilitated when students apply their own beliefs and ideas to a topic; that learning involves feeling, thinking, perceiving, and behaving; and, finally, that learning is the process of creating knowledge” (Chaves, 2006). If we understand the classroom as a place where knowledge is not just disseminated, but actively created, we are closer to the path of knowledge as a liberating force rather than a credentialing mechanism.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paolo Freire opposes the “banking” model of education, in which knowledge deemed important by the dominant class is imparted to students in order to build their value. He argues that “those truly committed to liberation must reject the banking concept in its entirety, adopting instead a concept of women and men as conscious beings, and consciousness as consciousness intent upon the world” (2000, p. 79). Adult students are not only conscious, but can be a valuable resource, if the academy begins to see their knowledge as a welcome addition to discourse that increases the value of education for all students.

Conclusion

There are two issues at play in the subjugation of adult learners in our educational system. Firstly, they are being dismissed at the outset by a dominant culture that does not consider them worthy of a true, intellectually expansive education. Secondly, once they enter the classroom, their experiential knowledge is dismissed as irrelevant to academic discourse, and their learning needs and epistemological frameworks are marginalized. These two forces not only

limit the access of adult female learners to education but also restrict the authority of these learners to define what counts as knowledge.

How can we change this? To quote Paolo Freire, “the concrete situation which begets oppression must be transformed” (2000, p. 50). The current situation, of training adult learners, especially women, to perform predefined functions rather than educating them to become critical thinkers and knowledge producers, is rife with sexism, ageism, classism, and a belief that these students have little to contribute to academic discourse. While expanding access is to be commended, the structure of learning itself needs to be transformed.

We must ask why certain educational pathways are marketed to adult women in ways that limit their potential, and why their ambitions are so often framed in terms of service rather than leadership. Once inside the classroom, institutions must strive to collaborate with these adult learners and treat experiential knowledge as a vital intellectual resource rather than an anecdotal supplement.

If higher education is going to truly be a force of liberation, it needs to move beyond the narrow equation of education with workforce preparation and embrace a model in which adult learners, particularly women, are recognized for the knowledge they produce. Only then can the academy move from managed inclusion to true transformation. In doing so, we not only treat adult learners more justly, but also improve the intellectual life of the university itself.

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