

CHAPTER 7. SIGNIFICANCE TO ADULT EDUCATION

This study does many things; it does not do many others. For example, it contributes to my personal commitment to environmental advocacy as an adult educator. It examines the way that environmental (adult) education is constructed, legitimized, and utilized in decision-making processes. The work situates critical research in the realm of the environmental justice movement. Locating the ethics of naming industry and other social institutions as agents of marginalization and power was paramount. The work explores authority, sense-making and power relations in the context of educational dynamics at a specific hazardous waste site.

Too often adult education fails to link critical empowerment and critical (eco-) literacy to education for social change and radical democracy; it is hoped that this study begins to address this lacuna. The research situates adult education as a political activity, a process of hope and a practice of freedom. It locates adult education at the frontier of critical democratic dialogue relative to the environment.

The enterprise positions “liberatory adult education from the grassroots” as a process of desocialization where socialization to an industrial narrative meant becoming adults in the shadow of cultural domination. The adult education efforts of PCCE, although not articulated in educational terms, involved: dialogue; sharing authority; a commitment to radical democracy where everyone had a voice in the knowledges that were produced; and utilizing members’ understandings, values, and beliefs about pollution in the resolution of environmental problems. It illustrated that working- and middle-class women are fully arrayed, as cultural producers, to develop strategies for social change. The undertaking depicted how a group of adult learners produced a counter-cultural public sphere which led to a greater sense of agency than that produced by isolated individuals. It showed the value of distance education through computer technology in maintaining local control while providing access to broader environmental education and information without the concomitant intercalation of (mainstream) outside groups into the local landscape.

Suggestions for Further Study

Seemingly as many questions remain about the educational dynamics in Palmerton as were answered. Many new insights that emerged during the study opened the possibility for further investigation. The story of this Appalachian town is more than a morality tale of a group of women setting out to amended (what they perceive as) environmental wrongdoing. The study focused little on the dynamics internal to PCCE. Although I mention at least one incident of inner dissension when several members entered into a legal battle with the company, the group was not without its own growing pains which remain to be problematized and investigated. Too, the position that fugitive knowledge is a requisite for challenging the official scientific discourses in the areas where elite knowledge reproduces domination and the *status quo* must still be addressed. Time did not allow me to develop that very significant aspect of research. I did not explore how non-PCCE women mediated the tensions between the data which indicated potential health problems and their own non-involvement in environmental activism. What was their relationship to the growing critical eco-literacy in the community? Also, the position that pedagogy was an outcome of struggle, and not just an outcome of agency is only hinted at in this work. I have left this arena of investigation open for future study. Rich meta-categories such as radical democracy, the broader ramifications of power in the public sphere mediated through public institutions, and the significance of working- and middle-class women joining forces as a model for civic courage should intrigue most readers--and the absence of answers in these arenas leave them yearning for more, as it does me. What each of the women brought in their social passports as they permeated the borders of the other are unexplored herein.

Finally, and importantly, I focus little on the privilege(s) that I carried into the study and the struggle of the women as a white, middle-class, gay, male. The registers of difference, such as race, class, gender, and sexual orientation are only discussed in a cursory way. When I asked Louise Calvin, at the end of the study, about my "male privilege" in light of the strong understanding of patriarchy and male domination which the group had, she was quick to point

out that I was “different.” She related that my openness to collaborative processes were “bridging” rather than blocking my relationship to the group. Behaviors such as drawing out other speakers rather than manipulating the conversation, supportive listening, mutual sharing of affective, cognitive and personal knowledges, and respect for others’ narrative spaces-- characteristics of women’s ways of knowing (Thorne, et al., 1983)--allowed for bonding with PCCE members.

The question of how authority presents itself is not fully addressed. This is especially important in light of the ethnographic technique of “member checks” which produced a powerful arena for intersubjective understandings between the researcher and the researched. It is hoped that in time I will become more fully aware of what I need to learn about these dynamics and what I need to unlearn. Yet, despite these shortcomings, the study makes modest contributions to the field of adult education, cultural studies, and critical eco-literacy for radical democracy.