Repressive Tolerance and the Practice of Adult Education

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ABSTRACT

Herbert Marcuse’s concept of repressive tolerance argues that behind the justification of tolerance lies the possibility of ideological domination. Tolerance allows intolerable practices to go unchallenged and flattens discussion to assume all viewpoints have equal validity. When alternative, dissenting views are inserted into the curriculum dominant ideology means they are always positioned as the ‘other’ in relation to the mainstream. This article takes Marcuse’s concept and applies it to a number of familiar adult educational practices and concerns. It considers how Marcuse’s contrasting notion of liberating tolerance might be manifest in adult education.

Keywords: Herbert Marcuse, Ideological Domination, Liberating Tolerance, Practices, Tolerance

INTRODUCTION

As a practitioner I have always believed that one of the most practical things I have access to is theory. Theory helps me interpret what I see around me and in particular illuminates classroom and pedagogic dynamics. For example, my own understanding of my power and authority as an adult educator, and how it can be exercised responsibly and ethically, has been helped immeasurably by Foucault’s writings on power. Foucault has also helped me realize how many of the practices that I thought to be emancipatory, are actually experienced as manipulative. Again, reading in the literature of racial micro-aggressions

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has made me much more alert to when I am enacting such aggressions and to noticing them in classroom conversation.

In an eloquent passage in *Teaching to Transgress* (1994) bell hooks testifies to the way theory saved her life. In describing her need to make sense of her own family’s dynamics she writes “I came to theory because I was hurting – the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend – to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing” (p. 59).

Theorizing – generating provisional explanations that help us understand and act in the world - helps us breathe clearly when we feel stifled by the smog of confusion. We theorize so we can understand what’s happening to us and so that we can take informed actions. Our hope is that we can justify the time spent theorizing by developing insights that will be useful to us. The everyday theories of action that frame our practice as adult educators are highly functional. They are not usually developed for their intellectual elegance or enduring conceptual beauty; indeed, they are brutally abandoned when they cease to be helpful to us. If they’re useful we keep them, if they’re not we dump them.

One of the most helpful theories I have come across in my career has been Herbert Marcuse’s notion of repressive tolerance (Marcuse, 1965). In the late 1960’s and early 1970’s there was arguably no more famous public intellectual than Herbert Marcuse. This was particularly the case in education. In a text published at the time, Marks (1970) noted that despite death threats from the Klu Klux Klan, contempt from *Pravda* (the Soviet state sponsored newspaper), and attempts by the San Diego post of the American Legion to deprive him of his academic post, “he has nevertheless more general popularity than any other living philosopher” (p. 8).

I was one of the millions reading Marcuse in the 1960’s and it was then that I came across his notion of repressive tolerance. At the time ‘tolerance’ was a much-favored term in the lexicon of progressive politics and education. It was intended to convey a generosity of spirit towards ideas and behaviors that differed from the norm, and to prevent a knee-jerk labeling of anything out of the ordinary as somehow being deviant. For those reasons it sat very well with the ‘do your own thing’ philosophy of the time that encouraged experimentation with multiple alternative lifestyles.

Marcuse’s analysis of tolerance was like an intellectual bomb going off in my life. I can even picture where I was when I first read it, sitting in the lounge area of the *Lanchester College of Technology* library in Coventry, England. Suddenly, things that had nagged away annoyingly at me became clear. In a brief essay, Marcuse had nailed the contradictions embedded in the educational urge to hold free, open discussions that actively included the widest range of views, and to withhold judgmental condemnation of ideas that differed from our own familiar beliefs.