

GUEST EDITORIAL PREFACE

Special Issue on Critical Theory

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One can never predict what authors will write about when an open invitation is extended to contribute an article on Critical Theory to a special issue of a journal. Will it hold together? Will they all see the same hand-writing on the wall? How will they read the signs of the times? Do they even stand on common ground? The authors in this special issue do share, I would argue, several basic assumptions. First, all of them assume that human flourishing requires that we conceive of socio-cultural learning processes as learning processes. This is a basic metaphysical assumption. Second, the authors ascribe to the classic commitment of Critical Theory to craft theory with the practical intent of precipitating cognitive learning processes that achieve beneficial changes in the self-understanding of individuals and groups.

Third, all of the authors share, in some way or another, the perception that our neo-liberal, globalized world (dis)order has not contributed to expansive human flourishing and irenic world politics. In this sense, the authors share the “negative dialectics” of the great tradition of Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, Habermas and Honneth. Fourth, the authors believe that Critical Theory is useful. It pries open our teaching practice, cracks the hard shell encasing crippling ideologies, illuminates strategic and communicative power distortions maligning learning processes, encourages us to read history in terms of identifying the locus of emancipatory thought and action, and enables us to articulate a reasonable account of how our world has constituted itself. Critical Theory carries potential to think what is unthinkable, to identify

what is repressed or suppressed and what is forgotten and must be remembered.

The articles assembled offer us sophisticated (and original) thinking. In itself, this is encouraging and to be lauded. McGray's article on Marx and the Paris Commune surprises us with the deft way he teases significance from Marx's nineteenth century texts on the civil war in France toward illuminating the "emancipatory potential of informal learning" and "transformative spaces of learning." McGray drops many delectable insights in this unusual article: he awakens us to consider the role of popular clubs as emancipatory learning sites, the meaning of dialectics and even challenges us to consider the geography of learning. Welton's article takes on the rather lonely task of rehabilitating the workplace as site of emancipatory struggle. He does this by engaging Habermas' critics of his views on work, and considering Axel Honneth's latest attempt to draw "work" from the dark shadows of contemporary life and thought into the broad daylight. Brookfield explores Critical Theory through personal narrative. Courageously, he raises serious and difficult questions regarding how we acquire an emancipatory consciousness or subjectivity as well as where the sites that could foster an authentic oppositional consciousness might exist. Brookfield offers penetrating insights into his own teaching practice—through the conceptual lens of Marcuse's noted idea of "repressive tolerance." Reading Brookfield (and Plumb and Doughty,

too), one is reminded of the way Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse believed that capitalist ideology had penetrated into the recesses of the human mind, rendering conventional educational practice ineffectual.

Doughty provides a lucid overview of the travails of Critical Theory in the last few decades. He provides us with an exemplary critique of the way instrumental rationality has colonized community college education. Doughty shows us how Habermas' theory of knowledge-constitutive interests can help us assess what has actually happened to community college education over the last forty years. He thinks that Habermas' theory is primarily diagnostic and rhetorical: like Adorno and Marcuse, to keep the dream of another world alive. Plumb's article offers an elegant account of the journey of the "Habermasian learning theory" project in contemporary adult education and the larger society. Although Plumb ascribes (as does Welton) to the accomplishment of Habermas' provision of a normative foundation for adult education, he thinks that the Habermasian Project ran into rough ground when post-modern currents of thought undermined foundationalism (or any claims to transcendence). He also thinks that the argument for "defending the lifeworld" as goal of adult education needs deepened reflection and more focused precise analysis. For him, the idea of "emancipatory practice" remains a black box. To help with this task, Plumb draws on some of the remarkable think-

ing of the British critical realist school. These ideas will be new to many readers; they await further explication. I think we can say that this special issue contains innovative and original approaches to the work of Habermas.

I am proud to have been able to assemble these five articles: all working creatively in the genre of Critical

Theory. There is much here for those who put themselves into practice as adult educators.

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Guest Editor

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Michael Welton received his Ph.D from UBC in the history of education and has taught at Dalhousie University and Mount St. Vincent University. He is currently a faculty member in educational studies at Athabasca University and an adjunct professor with the Centre for Higher Education and Training at UBC. His books include In Defense of the Lifeworld: Critical Perspectives on Adult Learning and Biographical Studies of Fathers Jimmy Tompkins and Moses Coady. His most recent book is Unearthing Canada's Hidden Past: A Short History of Adult Education. Welton explores the interplay of Critical Theory with our understanding of the learning dynamics of history.