

Gatekeepers: The Role of Adult Education Practitioners and Programs in Social Control

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"The adult education system is like a large plantation where the students are kept in place by gatekeepers, who believe that they are doing the right thing." [1]

Calvin Miles, Adult Student Leader

Introduction

There is an urgent need to build a movement for adult education in the United States. Tens of thousands more classes are needed to enable democratic participation in the economy and society. This dramatic expansion of adult education and literacy should be aimed at the development of critical consciousness and civic participation of over ninety million potential students. Adult students and potential students who are aware of the world and actively involved can transform their communities and society. Adult education teachers and programs can serve the liberation of adult students or they can be society's gatekeepers, to control and domesticate them. This gatekeeping is manifested in the unequal treatment based on race, gender and nationality, but its foundation rests on the class relationships in this society. Describing work experience with teachers and programs in New York City, this article will begin to look at the detrimental role of social control in adult education.

Education is tied to work through turning adult education into human resource development. This top-down view of training is one in which education is used as social control rather than full multidimensional educational experience. We learn to earn, not to live. (Cunningham, 1996, p.157)

Students and Adult Education: The Amazing Potential

Gatekeepers, unfortunately make up a large part of the adult education system in the United States. They can be teachers, administrators and other staff who stand directly

in the way of the full development of literacy students. Gatekeepers can be of any gender, race or class, but what they share in common is an educational practice and content that limits and stifles the full potential of adult students.

To understand the impact of gatekeepers in education, it is important to first consider: who are the students of adult education, and what do they bring to society?

- Antoine, a former student recently co-taught a class about the history and politics of Haiti, his homeland. He was full of inspiration and information. His words and commitment to his country, engaged and challenged the thirty five adults who come for language, math, GED preparation and more.
- Sophie, who was a teacher in Trinidad- Tobago, came to class to get her GED here, because her credentials and experience from home were not recognized. A strong woman, she consistently demonstrates the knowledge of community building, teaching and counseling.
- Jude, who comes from South Carolina and is stubborn as a mule, raises strong questions about Black History and the inequalities that still plague our country.
- Nadia from Morocco woke up many students and raised their consciousness when she described what happened to her small town, Qued Zem, after the main textile factory closed down and moved to China.

These adult students and so many others bring a wealth of experience, knowledge and understanding to adult education classes and programs. Yet, their experiences of survival and perseverance shine with a brilliance that often goes unaffirmed. Even more striking is the un- limited potential of these ambassadors from every state, country and culture of the world. I am convinced that adult students have the potential to do any task and do it better than many who currently teach, practice law and advocacy, build houses and offices, heal the sick and doctor, deliver social services, serve in office and lead the country. They would be an improvement over many who lead our country today.

As a major consequence of social inequality, the potential of all human beings in this hierarchical and biased society is constantly underestimated. The stereotypes and myths of race, gender, nationality and class serve as effective blinders to what people

have and what they can achieve. This devaluation is obvious in adult education and literacy programs, where the majority of students are people of color, women, immigrants and working class. Given the opportunity to use what they know and develop their potential, adult students could educate us all and positively help to transform the values of American society.

A large section of the student population in New York City comes from countries around the world [2] and they come for many reasons. Some are joining family members already here or escaping difficult conditions, but a great majority are seeking opportunity and a decent living. The United States represents, as they have been told repeatedly - the land of opportunity. They expect the streets to be paved with gold. Once here, they quickly realize the truth. While there is great wealth and opportunity in the U.S., many doors are not open to them and the distribution of wealth is dramatically unequal.

It is also true, that the wealth of this country has been built off of the profits made from many of their homelands at the expense of its people. Their homelands may have high levels of unemployment and poverty, pushing them to these shores for work. Many wish to return, but working to survive and to send money back home, keeps them here. They come to adult education classes, when they can find them, with hope and energy to improve their lives and the futures of their families. Some come with credentials and professional training. Including working class students from our ghettos and poorest communities, they all need language skills and GED's (High School Equivalency Diplomas) for work, college and recognition. For so many, the land of milk and honey may taste like sour milk, without the opportunity to secure a decent living.

The field of literacy is filled with teachers and other staff who pour their hearts and energies into the tasks of helping adult students. They assist so many to improve their math and language skills and to achieve their high school diplomas (GEDs) under very difficult conditions. The potential for adult education though, is enormous, including the greater participation and leadership of millions who are now excluded from political processes. Many teachers struggle against the tide of government and corporate pressure, employing alternative and popular education methodologies and content to radicalize their classrooms and the learning that takes place. It is clear that

the economic and political system works to make us all gatekeepers, but the development of consciousness is key to the emancipatory education we need.

“A major concern of critical pedagogy is that students develop the critical capacities to reflect, critique and act to transform the conditions under which they live” (Walsh, 1991, p. 140)

“For it is through this critical process of discovery and empowerment that teachers and students move in solidarity across the terrain of cultural differences to arrive at the knowledge that hidden in the complexity of these differences are many ways to be human, and many ways to struggle for a world in which we can all be free.” (Darder, 1991, p. xvii)

The Context: What do adult students find when they seek out classes?

"Education for domestication is an act of transferring "knowledge" whereas education for freedom is an act of creating knowledge and a process of transforming action that should be exercised on reality." (Freire, 1985, p.102)

Dennis Walcott, the city's Deputy Mayor, speaking at a Channel Thirteen Adult Education Conference in 2005, called adult education the 'Best kept secret in New York City' [3]. Unfortunately, this is true because the programs are not seriously advertised. Many who desire to learn English or to develop or strengthen their literacy skills, may not know adult education classes exist. They may not know where classes are and how they can join. A small percentage of the population knows that there are programs but there are no ads on TV, Radio or the newspapers. Even on the massive NYC subway system that transports 3 million passengers a day, there is no sign for free literacy classes. The failure to advertise and promote classes is a severe detriment to the democratic participation of nearly 1/3 of the population of this country [4].

If literacy is considered such an important factor within the job market and so essential for democratic participation, why the silence? The underlying intention I believe, from the Mayor's Office and elsewhere, is to maintain and control the population. This is a need associated with fear of losing control of the population. Keeping disenfranchised people from adult education and literacy may serve a similar function to that of enslaved people denied the right to read, insuring their marginalization, exploitation, and disempowerment.

The 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy, which was recently released, reported that over 93 million people in this country have either a "basic" or "below basic" level in prose, document or quantitative literacy. Fewer than 3 million seats or places are available in adult education classes and programs. The situation in New York City may be proportionately worse because of the large non-English speaking immigrant population.

In New York City, it is estimated that nearly 3,000,000 residents may need adult education classes, but there are fewer than 63,000 seats available [5]. Nevertheless, literacy programs are poorly funded and constantly threatened with reductions in the number of classes (Lost in Translation, 2006; Literacy Rising, 2006). Although adult education students have a great deal to offer our communities, they are often blocked from full participation in society. In short, this constitutes a huge loss in human potential.

There has been a real failure of government at all levels, republicans and democrats alike to recognize and address the problem of literacy in our country. Our political leaders act as gatekeepers of literacy programs through the lack of funding and support for such a necessary community resource.

At higher levels of administration, the disrespect for and neglect of adult education becomes more obvious. Congressional and state levels of funding are enough to convince you of this, but witness the following statements. A Deputy Superintendent of the Department of Education in New York City stated that, "Adult education students have already blown their chance to an education. They should have gotten it right the first time." [6] She explained that we shouldn't be wasting money on classes for people who have already failed. An Instructional Superintendent, Lisa Clarke, stated that, "there is no difference between education for K-12 school children and adult students, and we shouldn't let these adults get away with anything." These infantilizing attitudes reflect the all too pervasive prejudice that adult students are like little children and should be treated as such. Over the years, New York City Mayors (Koch, Giuliani, Bloomberg) [7] have cut and vetoed education programs for people on public assistance, saying that "they don't need education, they need workfare." The icing on the cake is a United States President who has repeatedly proposed severe cuts to adult education and literacy programs. In 2006, President George Bush proposed a

64% cut in Federal funds to Adult Education and was only forced by a popular mobilization to give up his proposal. [8]

Two Roads: Education for Liberation or Domestication

Education of a liberating character is a process by which the educator invites learners to recognize and unveil reality critically. The domestication practice tries to impart a false consciousness to learners, resulting in a facile adaptation to their reality; whereas a liberating practice cannot be reduced to an attempt on the part of the educator to impose freedom on the learners. (Freire, 1985, p.102)

Paulo Freire points out how the educational system has been used by the dominant forces in society to control the working class, to limit the consciousness of the oppressed and thereby limit their participation in government, society and social transformation. In opposition to this domesticating form and content is an education for liberation that develops critical consciousness, leadership and supports action for social change.

Hence, liberatory education is based on the students' potential to understand and change their lives and the world. 'Banking' or domesticating education assumes that the student is an object - there to listen, to obey and not to question. Domesticating education prepares adults to silently follow their leaders. It is the ideal training program for corporations, banks, dictatorships and the armed forces who require blind conformity and obedience, permitting decisions to be made that affect the masses of people with the least participation, interference or resistance from them.

Adult Education has been reoriented and reduced to education for work. This movement has been relentless and accompanied by the professionalization of the field. It is a natural outgrowth of a noncritical stance of functionalism, capitalism, and technology by those who once saw education linked to personal and social transformation necessary for democracy. A critical response from the field has occurred with a number of persons challenging the way adult education is being reduced to human resource development. (Cunningham, 1996, p. 151).

Preparation for work has always been an acceptable and rewarded focus of education under capitalism, whether jobs are available or not. The better we prepare people for work, the more available cheap labor will be readily available to meet the needs of the corporations. The classroom that focuses solely on the preparation for work is without

question, a domesticating influence on learners. This follows the dictates of corporate America and sustains the interests of capital.

Capitalism as an economic system concentrates educational resources on insuring the workforce is ready for maximal production - not for critical thinking, understanding history, or active involvement in changing social conditions. The logic of production for profit dictates that, 'If workers need training, then we must train them to satisfy the market place.' The qualities of obedience, discipline, hard work and loyalty can all serve this purpose, much like what is demanded of a slave, a trained animal or a factory worker. Meanwhile, as our country continues to produce less and consume more, the need for additional workers decreases. The question then becomes, why do we need adult education? The threat to adult education programs from increasing budget cuts grows out of the basic economic relationships of our society, which views more and more of the population as dispensable, disposable or unnecessary. Hence, how teachers and students understand of this reality becomes of utmost importance.

Joseph Dietzgen (1906), an 18th century German philosopher argued, "Manual laborers do not sufficiently appreciate the real value of mental labor. Their healthy distrust against the leading scribblers of bourgeois society leads them too far. They see how much wrong-doing is going on under the cloak of intellectual work and are therefore inclined to undervalue mental labor and to overestimate manual labor." (Dietzgen, 1906, pp 13-32)

He insisted that the working class has been outwitted by the capitalists. If this is so, then what is needed is the development of consciousness, scientific thought and critical intellectual analysis, through a liberating educational process that creates the conditions for democratic participation, voice, and ultimately, social action.

In contrast, a domesticating education actually leaves students more disarmed in their efforts to obtain and retain work and improve their position. Considering the changing nature of the job market and the economy overall, students need to become aware of the conditions that shape their lives and critical skills to analyze their situation.

Through such a process, students can potentially join together to challenge the conditions that oppress them and by so doing demand jobs with a future and economic conditions that benefit all of us, not just the wealthy and privileged. But to

accomplish such an outcome, educators must move beyond the limiting dictates of schools, employers, and corporate boardrooms.

There is no question that government standards and required accountability place a huge pressure on programs, administrators and indirectly on practitioners.

Rationalized administratively, these standards are aimed at domesticating and controlling adult education students, despite the efforts of creative practitioners and administrators who struggle to broaden their application. Given the incestuous relationship between government and the corporate world which dictates standards and accountability, adult education practitioners are often forced to continually explain their actions in the classroom by using whatever loopholes they can find to justify their practice---despite heroic efforts to act independently in the interest of the students. Unfortunately, this domesticating process continues without massive opposition or social transformation. Inherent to the system, the role of gatekeepers is defined by the relationship between government and capital, its director.

Gatekeepers, then, are essential to perpetuating structures of inequality in schools and society. There are many teachers who struggle to become critical educators, who work hard against the tide to raise political, economic and social consciousness. They are educated and transformed in the process of teaching and open doors to adult students actualize their potential and revolutionize the world around them.

Gatekeepers: Domesticating Urban Missionaries and Professionals of the State

Literacy becomes the result of an act by a so-called educator who 'fills' the illiterate learner with words. The magical sense given to words extends to another ingenuity: that of the Messiah. The illiterate is the 'lost man.'

Therefore, one must 'save' him, and his 'salvation' consists of 'being filled' with these words, mere miraculous sounds offered or imposed on him by the teacher who is often an unconscious agent of the political policies inherent in the literacy campaign. (Freire, 1985, p.8)

Teachers and programs that function as gatekeepers, consciously and unconsciously, obstruct the fullest contributions and development of students, limit their critical analysis and thwart their collective efforts to transform society. When a teacher treats an adult like a child, the adult student is robbed of respect and loses control of their own learning process. Like spoon feeding a baby, the teacher makes every decision,

as to what other foods or learning are appropriate. This practice does not allow the full development of students and stifles voice and leadership. It undermines the needed equality between adult students and teachers. Here teachers are the suppliers of all knowledge, with students only learning what the teachers allow. Therefore, the gatekeeper's limited knowledge and understanding defines the limits of discussion and learning. Sometimes the practitioner regards the students as his/her children, naïve and ignorant, which he/she is obligated to civilize or educate.

The underlying assumption here is the inferiority of the student and the superiority of the teacher/administrator. This relationship mirrors the experience of immigrant students from former colonies, where the colonial powers and representatives treated people in the colonies as inferiors to be ruled. Domesticating education, or what Freire termed 'Banking Education,' has the knowledgeable teacher filling the empty heads of the adult education students. Reinforcing this domesticating role, for example, are adult education teachers who refer to particular students as if they were pets, like a favorite puppy. This is all interwoven with the sense that teachers and programs have dominion over their students. And although adamantly denied, many adult education teachers echo the attitudes and behaviors of urban missionaries ministering to the less civilized students and neighborhoods. Freire writes about the "absolutizing of ignorance", one of the myths of oppressor ideology in which "someone decrees the ignorance of someone else. The one who is doing the decreeing defines himself and the class to which he belongs as those who were born to know; he thereby defines others as alien entities." (Freire, 1970, p.114-115)

These practitioners may see their own cultures as superior to those of other ethnic groups and nationalities -- much like the United States deciding when Iraq may be ready for "democracy and freedom." They may view other cultures paternalistically, praising the interesting food, dress or language, but all the time holding fast to the superiority of their own background or status. They may conclude that the United States is culturally superior because of its higher standard of living - credited to its genius and its 'freedom', and not to its global economic exploitation and political control of other countries and peoples. There is room in the domesticating educational process to appreciate the different holidays, the curious styles of dress, and unusual foods, but not for the exploration of colonialism, racism, and changes in the world

economy. Why students are here seeking opportunity never is broached in the “fun” and entertaining lesson plans of domesticating pedagogy.

Most often these teachers have been educated by the schools that serve the dominant economic interests in our society and therefore they reproduce what they have been taught. They have been trained by years of systemic preparation to be gatekeepers and dutiful servants of a capitalist hegemony. But gatekeepers are not just the teachers and other staff who have the most direct contact with adult students, they are also the administrators, funders, and program Boards of Directors throughout the system.

Another unfortunate reality that also reinforces the detrimental role of missionaries or gatekeepers is that adult educators are often untrained in adult education. [9] The field is regarded so poorly or as unimportant by government and the public, that it is assumed that anybody can teach adults. As such, many adult education and literacy teachers over-emphasize the need for their authority to be respected and unquestioned by their students. Teachers in Brooklyn and East Harlem have told me that they want quiet classes, where students work and read independently on their assignments and; they prefer 'no questions.' Others have said that discussions or debates about real life conditions can cause them problems and can lead to fights and hard feelings. These examples echo a "banking" approach to education; one that keeps students inside "prescribed gates."

Often, in undervaluing the knowledge and experience that adult students bring to classes and the community, teachers consider student input and questions as distractions from the assigned topics and 'mandated' subjects. Yet, these 'interruptions' in the planned or unplanned curricula of adult education classes may prove to be the most important learning experience and opportunity for teachers and students. Because of student interests and contributions, these diversions from officially prescribed curricula may offer the greatest opportunity for meaningful engagement and the development of voice. More importantly, these side-roads when explored may also open the possibilities for critical analysis and the development of critical consciousness. Disabling such development enables domestication and passivity in students.

Hence, the result of domesticating education is that students are left at the mercy of employers and financiers, who objectify them as cheap labor, and a government that operates outside the consent or knowledge of the governed. Meanwhile, gatekeepers who only prepare students for the job market may be well rewarded for this service. Their schools and classes may receive awards and they will be made into professional models of adult education. Unfortunately, as long as teachers and programs hop to the tune of employers and corporations, we are robbed of the rich experience, history, culture, knowledge and wisdom of millions of people, who struggle with courage, perseverance, and dignity to overcome the limitations and constraints they face each day in this country.

The Professional Gatekeeper [10]

Education for liberation does not merely free students from blackboards just to offer them projectors. On the contrary, it is concerned, as a social praxis, with helping to free human beings from the oppression that strangles them in their objective reality. It is therefore political education, just as political as the education that claims to be neutral, although actually serving the power elite. (Freire, 1985, p.125)

The term professional is often used to describe someone who delivers a high level of service in their work. One of Webster's definitions of professional is "Having great skill or experience in a particular field or activity." However, the call for professionalism in teaching has played a domesticating role. It has often been used by government and management to keep teachers from unionizing and thus from seeing themselves as workers, as part of the community and as peers of their adult students. Like the title of expert, it has been used to separate the teachers and others from the students they serve and could learn from, as well as teach. What is systemically rewarded is the 'professionalism' of the educator, not the ability to communicate or work with students on common ground. Miles Horton, a founder of the Highlander Center in Tennessee in 1931, pointed out the role of experts in the educational process as serving to provide information, not to tell people what to do. To many times, the expert, professional, lawyer, teacher, etc. acts as if he 'knows all' and the students are only there to listen and follow the directions. Horton emphasized that people from communities are the real experts, whose shared experience and learning can solve any

problem. Too often, the professional expert is arrogant and only serves to minimize the knowledge and experience of the learners. (Horton, 1990, p. 130)

The false generosity of gatekeeper-teachers is a product of the system that educated them - a system that reproduces the existing power relationships in society, rather than change them. Despite this fact, many of these teachers still claim that education and their classes are neutral.

The More GED's the Better, Right?

Robert Schull wrote in the Foreword to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that

There is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the people into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes 'the practice of freedom,' the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (Schull, 1970, p.16)

Obtaining the GED (General Education Diploma) is of course an important goal to those who need this credential for work or college. A teacher once asked me why I was teaching social studies to a student who had already passed that section of the GED test. This teacher viewed the GED as the only important goal, and while administrators rewarded her for her focus and her successes, she became the expert on getting people their GED's.

However, students need to know much more about the world than simply what is on the GED test. The test represents a very limited field of knowledge, carefully avoids controversial questions and is culturally biased. It is designed as a hoop that one must jump through to be seen as barely "competent" by the powers that be. Education is much more than just teaching to the test. Trained monkeys can give back what is given to them, but such regurgitation is not education. And while administrators at all levels can rationalize that the newer GED is better, and that other subjects can be brought into the classroom, the GED still is what it is - a hurdle constructed for social control. And it is those teachers who only teach to the test, and get the 'best' test results that are well-rewarded for their successes.

Because students come to classes with strong expectations of obtaining their GED's, it is important to honor and respect their goal. However, the duty of an educator is to broaden their horizons and challenge the limitations they face. Students also know that when asked why they should be registered for a literacy program, that the two desired answers are: to get my GED and to learn English. Although they may have much more that they wish to learn, they will, nevertheless, give only the "right" answers. Why should they tell the truth, when it might disqualify them for enrollment or cause other problems? Why should they immediately trust a teacher, counselor or registration person? It is also true, that student's develop their own perspectives on education and their own goals through a reflective and dialogical learning process, anchored in the oppressive conditions they must negotiate daily.

More than ever, there is a pressing need to question the politics of the GED test, its cultural bias and limited parameters, as well as the entire learning process and content. Teaching to the test is domestication, not critical examination or consciousness. Yet despite the limitations, many teachers in adult education do a Yeoman's job of connecting test preparation with societal issues and important critical skills of analysis. Without those components, teachers could be classified as animal trainers.

Gatekeeper Myths

"No emancipatory pedagogy will ever be built out of theories of behavior which view students as lazy, defiant, lacking in ambition, or genetically inferior." (McLaren, 2003, p.93)

Over 20 years ago, I was diagnosed with osteoarthritis, a disease which damaged both my hip joints. Without knowing it, I had been adapting to this skeletal problem in many ways, including a noticeable limp, walking less and always looking down when I did walk. After hip replacement surgery, the obstacle was removed and I could stand up straight, loved to walk and could see the world literally from a different place. In a similar way, there are many obstacles to seeing the world more clearly. For adult educators, these obstacles are the myths and stereotypes promoted by a dominant ideology that disables teachers, limits their vision, and thwarts the their capacity to embrace the possibilities of their work in literacy.

Underlying an education for domestication and control are also myths or misconceptions about adult students, which are used to rationalize obstructive notions and practices of adult education practice. One myth is that all adults and children are the same, but this view is, in fact, a fallacy. Adult students with life and work experience are dramatically different from elementary school children. The mythicized world accepted by the gatekeeper claims equality of opportunity, the neutrality of the educational process and an unchangeable political and economic system. It prevents questioning and denies the importance of student and teacher voice and leadership.

In the 1920's, Eduard Lindeman [11], a pioneer in education for social change, described androgogy as the specialized study of education for adults. Adults have life experience, maturity and responsibility, and motivation. In most cases they have been making decisions and solving problems for years. They generally have sound ideas about what they need and where they want to go. Adults have different expectations of the learning process, needing to answer questions raised by their life experience. Children are only beginning to develop their understanding of education and learning, while adults see education more clearly as an essential doorway to a better life. Adults often feel that there is much at stake in their education, as it affects their families, income, children, work and career, community and the future.

Lindeman, believed adults discovered the meanings of life in the process of learning. In its essence, adult education was a method by which adults released their intelligence to handle the new social realities of the twentieth century. (Stubblefield, 1988, p. 147)

In a stark contrast to young children, adult education students have a wealth of knowledge and experience to offer the literacy classroom and society. As workers and family members they bring experience that could educate practitioners and other students to better understand the world and how to transform it. When the prejudices of teachers and administrators prevent them from recognizing the knowledge of lived experience this denies all communities the potential contributions of these students. This prejudice and the myths that underlie it, serve the interests of those who rule in our society, by minimizing the role and future of adult students. Moreover, it supports race, gender and class inequalities in the United States, which systematically perpetuate economic and social injustice. Consequently, even when teachers see

themselves as fair and unbiased, there is often a failure to recognize the strength and potential of students.

The Ideology of Gatekeeping

"Power concedes nothing without demand." Frederick Douglass

As previously stated, the literacy community lives in a constant state of uncertainty. Unrecognized as a serious community need and always in jeopardy of losing funding, programs and administrators fear losing what little they have. They are often afraid of making noise or rattling the cages, until their programs and classes are directly threatened. They often develop the perspective of a victim: "Please don't cut me so much!" From this perspective, some level of loss is acceptable, while teaching without necessary resources is normalized.

Maria Quiroga, an experienced popular educator and administrator who worked Union Settlement in Manhattan has said, "The problem with the literacy community is that it doesn't make enough noise." [12] Maria is right on target; woven into the fabric of the adult education programs and funding is a philosophy of getting by and surviving, without much noise. This philosophy fits the needs of corporations and financiers like a glove, but does not begin to address the needs of millions of unserved students of literacy. It is also the foundation for most current methods and content in adult education and literacy programs across the city and the basis for the evolution of the role of gatekeeping in these programs. Accordingly, most literacy programs are both meek and weak. If we don't want to make too much noise, then we don't need critical thinking, student leadership, and student organization. It is common practice in literacy programs to organize students for a letter writing campaign when programs are being cut, but student involvement takes a back seat when there is no immediate threat to the status quo. This approach fails to prepare students and staff and ignores the precarious nature of adult education in our society. There are a small number of adult education or literacy programs in New York and around the country that struggle to create a critical education process and to build support that is independent of controlling funding streams.

Not long ago a leader in one of our literacy organizations suggested to me that we should stop demanding more classes, but make the ones we have, models of adult education. He speculated that if we do this, our work will shine so well, that we will get more funding and classes. This is political nonsense! A parallel statement might be that we would have more health care, more jobs or more housing if we were just all healthier, worked harder, or had cleaner houses. It is a question of political priorities and political force that will get us the thousands more classes and programs that we need.

Programs are threatened and cut regularly. We are only serving 3% of the population in need. [13] But rarely is this fact openly admitted; and more often than not it is silenced. For example, when my classes were threatened with closure for 'insurance' problems, the Administrator for the Office of Adult and Continuing Education said that I shouldn't tell the students, even though they might lose the only class available to them. He said, "You know, they might get too emotional about it, - you know how these students can be." I told them anyway. By student's organizing and mobilizing the Church where classes are held, the actions of the students were instrumental in the keeping the classes open.

In another instance, when a newly organized Coalition for Adult Literacy [14] was asked to endorse an Adult Education Bill of Rights, four administrators who were present said, "I couldn't show this to my students, - they might demand these rights, and blame me for not providing them." I wondered if they would have done the same with the U.S. Bill of Rights. The level of paternalism and control exercised by programs and administrators is clearly gatekeeping.

Recently, when community based organizations that sponsor literacy programs were threatened with a serious loss of funds and closure, one program administrator said that he didn't tell the students, because he "didn't want to alarm them, get them upset," and it might get worked out anyway. [15] They did partially resolve the funding issue but they missed an opportunity to involve the students in their own fight for education. What could have been learned from this discussion and the actions taken by students, in their own interests? The attitude and philosophy that limits student involvement in issues that directly affect them, supports a domesticating education. This may get people ready for jobs, which may or may not be there, and GED's which

may or may not help their situations; nevertheless, despite these gains, the actions taken to silence students and thwart their democratic participation constitutes nothing less than gatekeeping.

Student Voice, Leadership and Organization

One of the most misunderstood aspects of my writing on pedagogy is the emphasis on voice. Coming to voice is not just the act of telling one's experience. It is using that telling strategically --- to come to voice so that you can speak freely about other subjects. (hooks, 1994, p.152)

The role of student leaders in awakening and involving other adult students is essential. When student leaders visited other programs in NYC trying to help them form new student committees or councils, teachers responded in many different ways. One teacher would not let her students talk, while another tried to minimize the potential of students' voices or leadership. Some downplayed the tenuous existence of adult education programs fearing students would be discouraged. This often represents, consciously or unconsciously, paternalistic views shrouded in teachers' misguided beliefs that they must "protect" their students from the real world. This view infantilizes adult education students and fails to recognize the role adults already play in their daily lives as parents, workers, and community members.

Teachers afraid to risk their own positions or administrative disapproval often denied visits by student leaders or limited them dramatically, in time and content. [16] When students propose taking more militant action to defend programs (i.e., sit-in at the Mayor's office in 1994), administrators attempt to stop their actions, saying "It might reflect badly on the whole literacy community." This comment reflects very real government and administrative disapproval of student organizing and leadership. When a good friend, teaching in an East Harlem program began to connect literacy students on public assistance with their rights and the possibility of organizing, he was warned by the State Education Department that he would lose his position and the program could be hurt as well. None of these justify the failure to promote an education for democratic empowerment, which must be centered on student voice, participation, leadership, and organization.

“Saving the program” without changing anything is another ploy to maintain the status quo. Sometimes, because of the constant threats to programs, teachers and programs organize their students to write letters to legislators or to visit government representatives. There are aspects of this effort that can be positive and awakening, including learning about government, formulating and organizing ideas and points, expressing grievances. But, it can also be a mechanical manipulation of students, so that every time the program is in trouble, the letter writing campaign can be put in place, and nothing more. By “more,” I mean student leadership development, strengthening of student voices and the organization of student committees. Programs have repeatedly used students to write and speak for funding, but there are many different ways to do this. This can be manipulative and insulting or it can help students to understand and be involved more substantively as active subjects of social change.

Yet, there is no question that literacy teachers can play an enormously important role in the education of disenfranchised adult populations. However, it requires opening the doors, rather than gatekeeping resources, relationships, and power. When student leaders offered to do a workshop for NYACCE, (New York Association for continuing/Community Education) a state literacy organization, conference coordinators refused to waive registration fees, even though students were willing to raise funds for their rooms, travel and food. [17] Programs across the city operated by the CUNY (City University of New York), libraries, Community Based Organizations and the Department of Education have also been reluctant or unwilling to provide civic literacy or voter education classes.

In The Narratives of Frederick Douglass, [18] he describes learning to read as a 10 year old enslaved African American boy. After the mistress of the plantation begins to teach him 3 to 4 letter words, the master finds out and at once forbids her to teach him further. He says, "If you teach him to read, it will forever unfit him to be a slave." The slave owner needed to maintain control of his power and his plantation. Illiteracy helped to guarantee enslaved workers and maximum profit.

Ronald Casanova [19], a homeless activist, has consistently stated that many programs that provide homeless services are invested in the status quo. They are not really interested in ending homelessness because they are invested in its perpetuation.

They hesitate to advocate real solutions, since these would confront the basic moral questions and rock the boat of their complacency. The end of homelessness would eliminate their jobs, programs, and services. Similarly, in the literacy community, we have people who benefit from illiteracy. Ironically, they are the same ones that call the fight to end illiteracy unrealistic and thus, end up working against its amelioration.

Yet, adult students, who have the most to lose, can be the most powerful and effective advocates for literacy. These students, as do their teachers, need to develop critical capacities, research skills, analysis and comprehension skills, in order to clearly pose and solve problems. They need to understand the history and operation of economic and political forces, to see where things are going and to learn to take action to change conditions. In many cases, adult education students bring international experience and perspective that can play a critical role in addressing important issues.

Students need to be armed with political consciousness to deal with the changing world around them. Years ago, students were told to get computer skills for the wave of the future. Today, although computer skills are useful, many computer jobs are now outsourced to Mumbai or Beijing, where workers earn \$.50 an hour. Students need to develop the ability to critically question, in order to bring about changes to the conditions they face in their daily world.

Hence, when adult students begin to organize independently, they find some adult educators who support their efforts, but many who do not. Perhaps, they are fearful that it will damage the reputation of the field or the image of the helpless and needy student. Teachers may fear the loss of control, status or power. Student leaders may challenge what teachers do or the kind of education they provide. Practitioners' responses are often critical of student led efforts. Programs and administrators are doubtful of the outcomes. They do not believe that things can change or that adult students can influence anything in any significant way.

Incorporating prejudices and biases against the students, they say, "After all, many cannot even read English." Class, race and gender prejudices underestimate the potential power of adult students. The poor treatment and pay of adult education teachers reflects these same prejudices. Practitioners are too quick to say that student efforts to organize are unrealistic, considering the political climate or the transitional

nature of adult students. Administrators set up handpicked student councils to replace independent committees that wage critiques of adult education programs and practices.

Popular education offers teachers and programs in the literacy field a perspective, methodology and content aimed at education for liberation. Valuing the experience of adult students and developing student/teacher consciousness are essential. Classes should be connected with communities and real social issues facing student's and teacher's lives. Dietzgen stated 150 years ago that scientific intellectual analysis is needed. Adult students and teachers need to become working class intellectuals engaged in transforming society to meet their needs and the needs of the future. Without any doubt, independent student voice, leadership and organization needs to be encouraged and nurtured in an educational process that critiques and changes social conditions and relationships within adult education programs.

Adult education and literacy programs are poorly funded and continually in danger [20] because they are seen by government as unnecessary. Adult students who are immigrants, women, minorities and working class are more and more viewed by capitalism as dispensable. In the field of adult education you can see that preparation for minimum wage jobs in the labor market is rewarded, but critical thought and student leadership are not. There is more reason than ever for massive adult education programs and for this education to be aimed at human liberation.

Education is a fundamental human right. As such it is clearly the responsibility of the state and a core element of any development policy committed to social justice. Securing the right to education is key to enabling people to secure other human rights, yet the right to education is violated by governments around the world. (Archer, D., 2006, p. 7)

Our society is in crisis! But, gatekeeping is not the answer. Rather, the flood gates to a critical revolutionary pedagogy should be opened. Adult student leadership and organizing are essential in the struggle for more opportunities for those who have had their right to literacy robbed from them. Our most important task as adult educators is to enact a humanizing education. Anything less than this, compromises our integrity and our political vision of liberation.

Notes

[1] Calvin Miles is an adult literacy student who became president of VALUE - Voices for Adult Literacy United for Education, the only national literacy organization in the United States led by adult students. He made this statement at a student leadership conference in New York City on November 11th, 2004.

[2] The City of New York, Department of Planning. *The Newest New Yorkers - Immigrant New York in the New Millennium* (New York, October, 2004). New York is long recognized as a city of immigrants from around the world. The term 'melting pot' may no longer apply, but the 2000 Census reports that nearly 40% of the city is foreign born. For example, 64% of the city's Haitian population of 95,580 people live in Brooklyn, one of the five boroughs.. Two thirds of the 81,400 Russian immigrants also live in Brooklyn. "Just over half of the 130,000 foreign-born from Guyana live in Queens, another borough of the city. The city's foreign born population comes from the Dominican Republic , China , Jamaica , Mexico , Ecuador , Trinidad-Tobago and nearly every country in the world. Adult education class populations in New York City represent all these nationalities. In the 20 years that I have been teaching adult education classes, I have taught students from over 60 countries.

[3] Deputy Mayor of the City of New York, Dennis Walcott as the keynote speaker, addressing an audience of 200 adult students and teachers at a Channel Thirteen Television Conference on Adult Education on October 16, 2005.

[4] The population of the United States reached 300 million in 2006. According to the Census Bureau which compiles statistics on the population of the country, 74 % of the people are 18 years old or older. The current adult population is approximately 222 million. According to the National Assessment of Adult Literacy conducted by the United States Department of Education in 2003, 14 % of the population is below a basic level of literacy and another 29% are at a very basic level of literacy. This totals 43% of the U.S. population and is well over a 1/3 of the country. These figures are for prose literacy and statistics for quantitative literacy are even worse.

[5] The Literacy Assistance Center in New York City and the Mayor's Office report that fewer than 60,000 people receive literacy services and 1.5 to 2 million adults

need these services in the city. Using Census Bureau data, the current adult population of New York City is approximately 6 million (total population slightly over 8 million). The National Assessment of Adult Literacy reports that 50% of the city's people at below or at a basic level of literacy, or approximately 3 million New York City residents. Over 47% of the city's population do not speak English in their homes.

[6] Margaret Harrington, a Deputy Superintendent of School in New York City speaking at a meeting of program directors in 1993. Comments made to Leslie Reid, the Director of the Young Adult Learning Academy, a program for out-of-school youth, ages 16 to 15 years old.

[7] The Mayor of the City of New York is directly elected by the voters every four years. The current mayor is Michael Bloomberg, succeeding Rudolph Giuliani and Edward Koch in that office. All three have repeatedly vetoed adult education programs for people on public assistance programs, in favor of work programs that undermine unionized labor and have no future for participants.

[8] Tara Colton. *Lost in Translation*, a report by the Center for an Urban Future, (New York, 2006) 9. "In 2005, the Bush administration tried to slash funding for adult and family literacy through The Workforce Investment Act, Title II, from \$569 million in FY 2006 to \$207 million in FY 2006. Advocates fought to get the funding restored and were eventually successful, but the attempt to eviscerate adult education funding shows the tenuous state of federal support for literacy programming. "

[9] David Greene. "Against the Tide: The Role of Student Voices, Leadership and Organization in Social Transformation" *Convergence* Volume XXXIX (1) (2006): 6. "They are often untrained in adult education. The field is regarded so poorly by government and the public, that it is assumed that anybody can teach adults." Literacy Assistance Center . "Statistics on New York State Literacy Programs" (New York, 2007). "In New York State, 88% of the adult education instructors are part-time employees and half of them are volunteers. Overall, they are poorly paid and do not stay in adult education.

[10] Even though the term 'gatekeeper' is not directly used, a number of critical educators have alluded to this role in their writings. (Hill, 2005: Cunningham, 1996; McLaren, 1989)

[11] Harold Studdablefield, *Towards a History of Adult Education in America*, (New York: Croom Helm, 1988) 149-152. Eduard C. Lindeman (1885 - 1953) was an early leader in the field of adult education. In his classic work *The Meaning of Adult Education*, he makes clear the social mission of lifelong learning with adults. For Lindeman, authoritative teaching, examinations which preclude original thinking, rigid pedagogical formulae - all of these have no place in adult education. He emphasized a strong commitment to progressive social action as a foundation for adult education. "Orthodox education may be a preparation for life but adult education is an agitating instrumentality for changing life."

At one point he was to describe this orientation as 'andragogical.' In a paper written with Martha Anderson and published in 1927, Lindeman described his orientation as 'androgogical,' referring to the study of education for adults. 'Not only could he relate education, social sciences and social problems to the problems of the day; he could combine concepts from social sciences with both natural sciences and philosophy. He was a pioneer on many interlocking fronts – a pioneer social scientist with an allegiance to both science and to society and its processes, and also a pioneer in adult education and social philosophy.'

[12] Maria Quiroga, an experienced popular educator and administrator in adult education programs, speaking at a workshop on leadership at the Literacy Assistance Center in New York City in March, 2003.

[13] Endnote 9 explains the 3% figure, but the threat to programs is consistent. When the U.S. economy and markets are reporting 'growth' and greater profits, there has been some trickle down of literacy funds, but adult education is not considered a priority. It is often one of the first programs cut when funds or budgets are tightened. In 2003, the New York City Department of Education eliminated 147 classes, spurring organizing efforts to defend programs and students' educational opportunities. There have been many quality adult education programs that have been eliminated or cut to the bone. The current budget surplus in New York City resulting

from stock market gains has provided small increases in funds for literacy and adult education.

[14] The Coalition for Adult Literacy was formed in 2006 to secure stable funding for many adult education and literacy programs in New York City. It has succeeded in pushing for some increases in funding, but is reluctant to include teachers and adult students in the coalition. It is mainly an organization of administrators and ignores the biggest provider of literacy services in the city, the Department of Education.

[15] In May of 2006, an administrator at the Fortune Society in New York City, a program that serves formerly incarcerated men and women explained to David Greene that his program was threatened with severe cuts. When asked if students had been informed of the crisis, he stated that he didn't want to alarm them, and the problem might be resolved

[16] Ryan Springer, an adult student organizer reports that teacher and program responses to student leader visits vary greatly, from open arms to closed doors. He states that, while "many progressive teachers are eager to see student voices encouraged by our visits, most are afraid. Some try to control their students, others try to tell us what we can say and to limit our connection. Few are willing to help students form their own committees and many won't let their students talk. Some teachers answer all the questions or even speak against what we are saying. Many programs seem afraid of what we have to say, and won't even arrange the visit." Report on Student Organizing, February, 2007, given to Students of Adult Literacy United Board Meeting.

[17] Calvin Miles. This incident was reported by Mr. Miles in February, 2007 after attempts to present a workshop on Student Organizing in Adult Education at the NYACCE Conference in Upstate New York.

[18] Frederick Douglass. 2005. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. (New York: Signet Classics, 2005). Frederick Douglass was an enslaved African American, who escaped from slavery and became a leading abolitionist in the fight for freedom. He later became the U.S. Ambassador to Haiti and played an important role

in the fight for all human rights. This story is from the narratives of his life and points to the critical role of reading and education in emancipation.

[19] Ron Casanova and Stephen Blackburn. 1996. *Each One, Teach One*, (Wilmantic, Conn: Curbstone Publishers). Ron Casanova is a leader in the fight to end homelessness in New York and in the U.S. Having been homeless for most of his life, he speaks from his first hand experience with many programs and services.

[20] Greene, 8. "Adult education programmes live a tenuous existence, are always threatened with cuts and closures are considered expendable budget items.." From "Against the Tide: The Role of Adult Student Voices, Leadership and Organization in Social Transformation". In *Convergence* Volume XXXIX (1) 2006.

The Fight for Adult Education, in *Literacy Rising*, a newsletter of the Grassroots Literacy Coalition, Volume 1, Number 3, Summer, 2006. 3. Programmes, whether they are provided by the City University system, the Department of Education, the Library system or Community Based Organizations are continually competing for scarce funds. In this process, there are always losers, and the biggest losers of all, are the student and potential students."

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