Socially emancipatory or socially emaciating: North American academic adult education and the place and participation of sexual minorities

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Paper presented at the 39th Annual SCUTREA Conference, 7-9 July 2009, University of Cambridge

In introductory and foundational courses in academic adult education in Canada and the USA, graduate students are usually introduced to the notion of *adult education as social education.* As they study documents like the 1919 Report of the Adult Education Committee of the British Ministry of Reconstruction, which is touted as heralding the modern practice of adult education, they learn that this notion was ensconced early on in educational policy and practice circles (Grace 2005a). As they read about the Highlander Folk School in the USA, the Antigonish Movement in Canada, and an array of other community-focused endeavors, they also learn that social education was key in the genesis of a modern practice that held up adult learning as a means to address the plight of ordinary people in social and economic terms (Grace 2006a). As they continue to engage research on the history of modern practice, they gain insights into adult education as a field of study and practice that has a longstanding commitment to advancing social inclusion, social cohesion, and social justice (Grace 2006a).

Of course, as even recent history indicates, this commitment is neither universal nor unconditional. For some groups of learners, adult education has not been a welcoming or socially emancipatory place where respect and accommodation are assured. Indeed, in their struggle for space and place in the field, these groups would describe adult education as a site marked by a socially emaciating ecology where involvement and interactions are restricted in ways that emulate historical social and cultural exclusions typifying the dominant status quo. The struggle of sexual minorities for place and the right and freedom to participate in North American academic adult education provides a case in point. Sexual minorities have been excluded or inadequately included whether adult education is constructed as social education or as a broader venture (Grace 2005b, Hill and Grace in press). We continue to mediate heterosexist, sexist, homophobic, and transphobic ecologies just so we can engage in adult education.

Sexual minorities include those individuals whose sexual orientations and gender identities fall outside heteronormative categorizations of sex, sexuality, and gender as well as outside the dichotomies of heterosexual/homosexual and male/female binaries (Grace 2007a). Sexual minorities comprise such positionalities as lesbian, gay, bisexual, intersexual, trans-identified, two-spirited,

and queer. Specifically, this paper explores desired and actual roles for contemporary adult education within the context of contemporary lifelong learning as a neoliberal formation and the context of the place and participation of sexual minorities. It overviews our status from a larger global perspective and considers how we have been positioned in North American academic adult education, as reflected in our struggle for access and accommodation in the US national Adult Education Research Conference. It speaks to what educators can do to include sexual minorities in their practices, and it concludes with an autoethnographic view of how educators can include sexual minorities in a more encompassing and contextualized practice of adult education and lifelong learning.

Desired and Actual Roles for Contemporary Adult Education in Contexts
Adult education and other constituents of lifelong learning ought to consider the historical, social, cultural, political, and economic contexts, ultimately seeing learning for adults as educational and cultural work for social transformation focused on all of life (Allman 1999, Grace 2007b). Still, learning across the lifespan is often narrowly focused and social and other contextualized learning is often shunted aside in the rush to engage in learning with neoliberal currency (Grace 2006b): 'In the main "the field" is described as though it is neutral, ahistorical and uncontestable, with little account given of a wide range of different histories and competing "fields," including … the personal and political learning that takes place in, for example, trade unions, women's groups, or groups for other marginalized people, such as gay and lesbian groups, Black and minority ethnic groups and so forth' (Burke and Jackson 2007, p.9).

Within the politics and culture of late capitalism, such sidelining of contextual learning is widespread. Much of the Global North has experienced a pervasive neoliberal policy consensus that stresses the value of a knowledge-based economy, technology and skill development, and a learning society in which participation in cyclical lifelong learning for economic advancement is an expectation (Grace 2006b, 2007b). Drawing on Foucault to frame this consensus within a politics of control, Fejes (2008) asserts that neoliberal lifelong-learning policy aims not only to construct learners (technologies of control), but also to have learners construct themselves (technologies of the learner). Social learning for cultural transformation goes against the grain of this politics of control that not only conflates being a competent worker with simply being a skilled worker, but also isolates training and development for workers from broader social and other contextual considerations (Forrester 2005, Grace 2006b). This de-centering of the social is troubling, especially in relation to groups like sexual minorities that neoliberal forms of lifelong learning usually leave out.

As it is framed within neoliberal pragmatism, lifelong learning in its contemporary cyclical iteration aims to produce an information literate citizenry, generate quality information, and provide universal access, all in the name of presenting itself as a medium and infrastructure for knowledge-and-skill building that aims to sustain and enhance the economic (Grace 2006b). The upshot of a neoliberal bolstering

of the economic is purportedly a bolstering of the social. However, while advancing the economic is important to create jobs and stability for workers, advancing the social has not been obvious or guaranteed under neoliberalism as a contemporary kind of pragmatism. Indeed social cohesion has been of little or, at best, secondary concern. 'It is in this sense, among others', as Freire (2004) asserted, 'that radical pedagogy must never make any concessions to the trickeries of neoliberal "pragmatism", which reduces the educational practice to the technical-scientific training of learners, *training* rather than *educating'* (p.19).

Freire's remark should not be misread as a dismissal of the technical and the scientific. Indeed the preeminent social educator valued them, but he did so by intersecting instrumental and economic issues with social, historical, cultural, and political concerns. He was concerned that neoliberal pragmatists tended to avoid this complex intersection. For example, consider the case of a homeless contingent of urban gay-male youth who subsist through sex work that makes them vulnerable to possible brutality at the hands of police or the johns who solicit their services. Neoliberal pragmatists would tend to react to their plight in a 'fatalistic manner, always in favor of the powerful—"It is sad, but what can be done? That is what reality is"' (Freire 2004, p.58). Even worse, neoliberal pragmatists would likely blame these youth for their predicament, suggesting that they had brought it upon themselves. They would ignore or downplay how systemic issues like heterosexism and homophobia have socially ostracized and damaged these youth, perhaps irrevocably.

Blaming sexual minorities for the troubles in our lives and miring us in nihilism have been commonplace in heteronormative culture and society. Under a theme intersecting adult learning, democracy, peace, and critical citizenship, Hill and Grace (in press) relate that sexual minorities clearly fall into the rank of secondary citizens in most countries of the world. Sexual-minority individuals and communities are denied full and equal rights, justice and equality, freewill, and the right to organize as well as opportunities to participate in civil society and open economic development in formal and informal economies. Examples are legion, and include being denied the right to marry, the right to have spousal/companion benefits in cases where these are offered to heterosexual couples, the right to adopt or foster care children, the right to inheritance rights when our life companions die, the right to hospital visitation rights, and the right to make medical or legal decisions for life partners when they are incapable of doing so. This list is far from exhaustive. Hill (2003a, 2003b, 2006) provides extensive documentation of these denied rights from the perspective of citizenship rights and the nation state. This composite exclusion deeply impacts the wellbeing and the public and personal health of sexual-minority citizens who are disenfranchised from access and accommodation that go hand in hand with the rights and privileges of full citizenship in democratic cultures and societies.

In a specific example, sexual minorities have regularly experienced the effects of ignorance, fear, violence, silence, and exclusion in North American academic

adult education as a subset of lifelong learning (Hill and Grace in press). Our difficulties in participating in the US national Adult Education Research Conference since 1993 demonstrate this. Our quest for place at AERC has been a collective effort by sexual minority and allied academics and graduate students to link research to advocacy and educational and community practices; it has focused on queer social activism and cultural work, transgression and transformation, vocality and visibility (Hill and Grace, in press). Hill (in Grace and Hill 2004) has described the backlash to this participation as a form of pointed and subtle policing of AERC borders by certain resistant individuals. While it is not illustrative of the majority of experiences where sexual minorities have been affirmed, enabled, and supported by AERC organizers and participants, such policing, when it occurs, cannot be ignored since it represents a shunning of sexual minority participants by some at AERC and an attempt to impede attendance at events such as the queer and allied caucus. As Hill (in Grace and Hill 2004, pp.173-174) relates, impediments to sexual minority participation at AERC conferences over the years have included:

> having the LGBTQ & AC [lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-identified, queer and allies caucus] misnamed as the "Social Action Caucus" in an AERC listing to avoid naming LGBTQ,
> being left out of a host's introduction of Caucus groups during the opening plenary session of an AERC,
> having our Caucus meeting as the only one scheduled in a different space (a fifteen-minute walk from the main conference site) outside the complex of buildings where all other AERC events occurred,
> having our Caucus scheduled against a presentation by a major figure in the field in order to keep, as a member of the host institution put it, the Caucus from "standing out too much," and
> having our Caucus brochures "lost" by the host committee and left out of the initial preparation of AERC registration packets until, following a vocal exchange, they were "discovered" in a cabinet and then inserted.

As markers of ostracism, these incidents speak to the contestation of the place and participation of sexual minorities at AERC. They also signify an abuse of power by some AERC organizers and participants who have subtly engaged in a politics of disenfranchisement and debasement of sexual minority colleagues and graduate students. They exemplify the history of our struggle for access, accommodation, and respect at the conference.

This reality of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-identified, queer, and other persons across the spectra of sexual orientation and gender identity is testament to the fiction of lifelong learning as globally inclusive social education. While many mainstream advocates of lifelong learning have made social inclusion and social cohesion thematic in their rhetorical framing of contemporary lifelong-learning discourse and practice, they only seem concerned with making neoliberalism look like something more encompassing (Grace 2006b, 2007b). Their construction of the social is limited, as they frequently marginalize or avoid power relationships, particularly sexual orientation and gender identity, in framing

learning for life and work. Even variously critical, feminist, radical, and liberal lifelong educators who link lifelong learning to issues of social learning and social justice tend to be silent on sexual-minority issues. Why would any lifelong educator do this and contribute to lifelong learning as a travesty of social learning? It may be an oversight tied to heterosexual privilege, or worse, heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia. Or maybe a silent educator views an engagement with sexual-minority issues as risky business that could damage a career. Nevertheless, educator silence speaks to the hegemony of heteronormativity in lifelong-learning discourse and practice. A trek through the literature shows that there has been little focus in contemporary lifelong learning and adult and higher education on sexual orientation, gender identity, and their variations and expressions (Hill & Grace in press). This is another example of an assault on the social (in queer contexts) in framing and engaging in lifelong learning in neoliberal times.

Despite this exclusion in mainstream educational and cultural spaces, sexual minorities do engage in learning. In both developed and emerging nations, they have always created spaces within the heteronormative lifeworld. Production, exchange, and distribution of knowledge of same-sex rituals and traditions, cross-gender role expressions, and non-heteronormative sexualities have historically contributed to a process of subaltern lifelong learning that is actually more common than is often recognized (Grace and Wells 2007, Hill 1995, Hill and Grace in press). In many locations such lifelong learning has been minimized or erased within repressive heteronormative and queer-phobic narratives. To counter this exclusion in the future, international organizations dedicated to lifelong learning have to engage in vital educational and cultural work for social transformation of sexual minorities in ways that those on the margins can set the terms of their own self definition to counter the dismissal and defilement that have historically accompanied their disenfranchisement. Such engagement requires inclusive lifelong educators to take up a key role as public intellectuals on the international scene: to help establish the conditions that enable sexual minorities everywhere to 'see themselves' and self-articulate their identities and how they wish to represent themselves. As this cultural work proceeds, those marginalized because of sexual orientation and gender identity and expression will be able to claim a history, a spectral community, and a self that is free to be, become, belong, and act. However, for now, the power of heteronormativity as a hidden yet assumed conceptual framework in lifelong learning and adult education has restricted sexual-minority inclusion in these educational domains. Moreover, it has limited possibilities for social learning in the knowledge-culture-language-power nexus where learners could engage sexual orientation and gender identity as relationships of power (Grace 2001, Grace and Hill 2004).

Doing It For Ourselves: Making Adult Education Personal
As an educator of adults who is also a member of a sexual minority, I explore Freire's conceptualization and expression of *just ire* to help me clarify impetus and action plans to guide my own educational and cultural work for social

transformation (Freire 2004, Grace and Wells 2007). For me, exploring my autoethnography is a starting point for this work (Grace 2006c). Engaging in autoethnographic research helps me gain insights into my queer self and how I am located in relation to others in the spectral queer community in adult education, heteronormative society, and the associated cultures that define how I choose to represent myself and act (or not act) in these social contexts (Grace 2001, 2007c). I place value on producing and exchanging my autoethnography. In some of my ecological explorations, I have investigated how others and culture have influenced my role as an educator, how my autobiography inspires cultural work or resistances focused on meeting the needs of sexual minorities, and how my role as a queer researcher informs my cultural work to make a better world for sexual minorities (Grace 2006c, 2007c). In this excerpt from a recent autoethnographical project, I speak to how my lived and learned experiences help me to think about the parameters of lifelong learning in a change culture of crisis and challenge.

> Who am I now? These days I think of myself as a [queer] critical social educator who shapes and expands his theorizing, research, and practice by reading and critiquing a range of social and cultural theories. I have a deep interest in educational policy development, and I believe that good policy provides both the protection and basis for good practice. As a gay academic working in the intersection of the moral and the political on LGBTQ [lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-identified, and queer] issues in education, I have found this to be the case. I also believe that I function best as an educator when I engage opportunities to work across public (Kindergarten -12), adult, and higher education. This may be a product of my lived professional history [working across all three domains]. However, I do see the need to work in the intersections. I believe that these dynamics are required, for example, for any of us involved in contemporary engagements with lifelong learning. As a notion and a modus operandi, lifelong learning, often presented in an ahistorical manner, has permeated policy and practice across all sectors of education. For adult educators to feel that lifelong learning is their domain or to be preoccupied with the notion that lifelong learning is usurping the role of adult education is to limit opportunities to see the porosity of all sectors of education to the effects of such cultural change forces. I am conscious of this in my national and international service work as I deliberate [the notion of lifelong learning] with colleagues variously positioned in the larger field of education. (Grace 2007c, p.127)

This locatedness drives a pedagogy of place that explores the specific experiences, problems, languages, and histories of sexual-minority individuals and communities who are grappling with understanding their identities and positionalities as a first step in strategizing possibilities for transformation of our social circumstances (Giroux 1993, Grace 2006b). In this light, a pedagogy of place is an accommodative pedagogy that constitutes lifelong learning as critical action. In building knowledge and understanding of sexual-minority positionalities and differences, this pedagogy lays a basis for the political, pedagogical, and cultural work necessary for social transformation.

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This document was added to the Education-Line database on 26 June 2009

A sociological perspective transcends biological notions of sex and emphasizes the social and cultural bases of gender. Sociological research points to the ubiquity of gender's influence in both private and public spheres, and it identifies differences—and similarities—in. Sociology offers a unique perspective on gender and sexuality and their importance in our social world. A sociological perspective transcends biological notions of sex and emphasizes the social and cultural bases of gender. Sociological research points to the ubiquity of gender's influence in both private and public spheres, and it identifies differences—and similarities—in how genders are treated socially and factors that change this treatment.