

Rethinking empowerment: a postmodern appraisal of critical educational gerontology

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Abstract

A key rationale in older adult education is critical educational gerontology [CEG]. CEG is concerned with the centrality of politics and powers in the way that late-life education works, with its ultimate goal being the empowerment of older persons to confront the social system with a view to changing it. However, the coming of 'late' and 'post' modern social realities means that CEG has entered a profound intellectual and conceptual crisis. Its foundations were constructed during a time of 'modern' capitalism when social inequality was structured along strict class lines, and when the principal focus of ageing-related social policy consisted in bridging families' income before and after retirement. Since then industrial societies have become increasingly characterised by more flexible forms of work organisation, an increasing breaking down of the neo-corporatist relations between state and labour, and rising levels of cultural fragmentation. For some educators, the time has come to close the lid over CEG, accept its analytical and practical obsolescence, and embrace other more relevant rationales. On the basis that retirement is far from being a uniform experience, many argue that the key goal of late-life education is to aid older persons respond to a fast changing world due to technological development and changing values.

Whilst acknowledging that 'post' modern ways of living are here to stay, this presentation rejects that the notion of empowerment has no place in contemporary social realities. Suffice to say here that as much as 19 percent in the European Union experience social exclusion and at-the-risk-of-poverty lifestyles. In such circumstances, the quest of linking education with empowerment and transformational change remains as necessary as ever. It is argued that the problem of CEG lies within its modus operandi, rather than its modus operandi. The way forward does not lie in ditching the critical epistemological framework for late-life education, but to renew it in a way that it rediscovers its empowering spark in a postmodern world. The presentation advocates CEG to work towards personal as well as social aspects of empowerment. Although individualistic forms of empowerment offered by vocational competence and consumerist acquisition may be modest

and circumscribed, at times even illusory, they are demonstrable and achievable in postmodern realities. In other words, CEG must accept that social empowerment in later life is also possible through educational activities promoting autonomy and self-actualisation, both of which can influence individuals to improve their social and personal well-being.

The key argument in this presentation is that the goals of CEG and postmodernity are not necessarily contradictory. Critical epistemologies of learning in later life have the potential to bring personal transformation whereby older persons become more able to take control of their social circumstances and achieve their goals. The pragmatic implications and possibilities of this claim are illustrated by reference to a case study on late-life learning initiatives in Malta. The title of the learning programme was Improving financial capability provision in later life. Following NIACE's (2008) briefing sheet, the course aimed at taking account of the changing personal, financial, management skills required by older persons. This is because there exists two dimensions of empowerment - namely, structural and subjective. The case study confirmed that whilst there is no doubt to the improvement of older people's lives when social structures are altered in a way that facilitate and improve the lives of older persons, empowerment can also be achieved if older persons are awarded the necessary skills to manipulate their immediate environment to their advantage.

Keywords: empowerment, critical educational gerontology, postmodernity, social change, personal transformation

Introduction

Throughout the past decade much of my work in the field of older adult learning was driven by an aspiration to consolidate and improve the 'critical' potential of late-life education (see Formosa, 2000, 2002, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2010, 2011). A running thread in my research was, and still is, uncovering the extent that structural inequalities in latter life limit the participation of subaltern elders in lifelong learning, whilst also seeking to place the notion of empowerment on the agenda of late-life learning. As Mezirow (2000 : 26) underlines, "a sense of self-empowerment is the cardinal goal of adult education". In essence, empowerment refers to the "process of enabling excluded and marginalised individuals and groups to exercise greater autonomy in decision making" (Barnes and Walker, 1996: 380). There are four criteria for assessing if empowerment has been achieved:

- (1) there must be a structural change,
- (2) the aim or intention must be grounded in a future vision that includes freedom, democracy, and authenticity,
- (3) there must be a shift as in what counts as knowledge, and
- (4), the change must be based on conflict theory.

1. Critical interludes

As is usually the case, my work - together with the field of critical educational gerontology [CEG] in general - received its fair share of approval and criticism. In an early critique, Percy's (1990) argued that later life is marked by extensive heterogeneity so that many elders are actually positioned in advantageous positions. The objectives of CEG are perceived as too 'dubious', 'comprehensive', and 'wide-ranging', to be successfully tackled by educational classes attended by a very minute percentage of older adults:

"Academics rarely say anything unequivocal about the large issues; if they do, there will be one academic to dispute what the other has said...Moreover, the assertion that 'central to geragogy would be its attempt to unsettle the complacency that older people feel' does give pause. Who judges? Who decides what is and what is not complacency?"

Percy, 1990: 235

Percy champions a humanist epistemology for late-life education whereby the educator is not attributed with any special vision and stresses that the benchmark of older adult education is the notion of 'older people as teachers, facilitators of learning, role models, educational resources, [and] repositories of wisdom'. If there needs be an educator, his/her role 'is to facilitate the process of learning for the learner, not necessarily to persuade him to social action or to be dissatisfied if a certain political awareness is not achieved'. As regards the question as to whose interests are to be served, Percy argues unequivocally that the answer has to be the interests of all people generally and the interests of older people in particular. This is because he believes that the argument that the general preference for liberal, non-vocational, education in later life as an expression of middle class values is simply ideological reductionism. The truth is, Percy concludes, that the liberal preferences of older people are precisely the result of having reached a point of the life-cycle where they have more leisure interests and are generally free of vocational and domestic concerns.

Another body of work that grapples critically with CEG, and with my work in particular, is that authored by my friend and colleague Alex Withnall (2000, 2002, 2006, 2010). On the basis of an empirical study on the choices and experiences of older adult learners, Withnall (2006, 30) claims that "the drive towards emancipation and empowerment implicit within [CEG] is inappropriate in that it assumed an unjustifiable homogeneity among older people and appears to be imposing a new kind of ideological constraint". Withnall refers to the difficulties experienced by critical educators in leading older learners to satisfactory levels of emancipation as evidence that power is a slippery entity and, hence, of the self-defeating nature of critical standpoints:

"(...) individuals within groups often seen by educators as powerless may in fact possess considerable power within other networks in which they operate so it is

probably too much of a generalization to talk of people as completely 'powerless' or as having been disempowered".

Withnall, 2010: 35

Influenced by the work of Usher and Edwards (1997), Withnall (2006, 30 - italics in original) argues that since nowadays retirement is far from being a uniform experience there is a need to shift 'the debate away from the policy maker and practitioner perspectives on *education* towards *learning* and ensure that the voices of older learners themselves, hitherto largely ignored, can emerge'. In line with pragmatic views on lifelong learning (e.g. Aspin & Chapman, 2000), the searching for a grand narrative for late-life learning is posited as a 'vain quest' on the basis that learning is an essentially individual undertaking with different meanings for different learners. Seeking to establish learning in later life as a solution for older persons to meet their need to respond to a fast changing world due to rapid technological development and changing values, she advocates that 'an alternative formulation might be to think in terms of 'longlife' learning that would straddle economic, democratic, personal and other concerns across the life course in an inclusive way' (Withnall, 2010: 116). This is possible, she argues, if learning in all its forms would then come to be seen as a more broadly based endeavour that incorporates the need for economic progress and social inclusiveness in tandem with the recognition of individual desires for personal development and growth as people age.

2. Postmodern cultures of ageing

In recent publications (see Findsen and Formosa, 2011; Formosa, 2011), I have taken to task such criticisms and constructed strong defensive arguments in favour of critical educational gerontology. Herein, I opt to travel in an opposite direction. Following McLaren's (2000 : 205) advice that "the pedagogical agent must continue to press forward while at the same time being self-reflexive about the contradictions and aporias in his or her political project", I will now seek to embrace, build, and expand - as much as possible - upon Percy's and Withnall's criticisms. This turning point resulted from a re-reading of the afore-mentioned criticisms and realising that, ultimately, Percy and Withnall did not refute the goal of the critical paradigm. Indeed, I am sure that both attest to the need for academics and policy-makers to work hand-in-hand to improve the everyday life of older persons. What these authors question is the Freirean, collective, social transformation process upon which CEG is hinged. Despite my long-standing resistance to such a denunciation, Percy and Withnall do have a point. We are no longer living in a 'modernist' epoch of organised capitalism. Nowadays self-identity has become a 'reflexively organized endeavour', built around the development of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives (Giddens, 1991). Self-identities operate on the basis of choice and flexibility, hence replacing the rigidity of the traditional life cycle with its predetermined rites of passage. Such changes have brought many a positive effect to the lives of older persons (Gilleard and Higgs, 2000). Post-

traditional societies develop new youthful images of retirement, a blurring between midlife and later life, and extended later life into a complex of states of personal growth development which takes into account the human diversity found in older cohorts. Increasing material affluence and consumer activity, as well as individual assertiveness, are now enabling retirees with an unprecedented potential to engage in cultural spheres of 'identity refurbishment'.

Although the exact break between 'modern' and 'postmodernism' has emerged as an enormous bone of contention, a dispute which in most probability will never be satisfactory resolved, it is evident that the contemporary epoch is more postmodernist than previous decades. Although many educators subscribe to Finger and Asún's (2001 : 114) assertion that postmodernism is the equivalent of "many roads to nowhere", postmodernism has a potential to "focus on the margins, the excluded, those who have no control over their lives...to speak for those who have never been subject (active human) but who are rather so often assumed to be objects" (Rosenau, 1992 : 173). As a result, it seems too simplistic to accept that the notion and practice of empowerment has no place in postmodernism. For instance, working in the context of psychological counselling, Shindler (1999 : 166) points out how the fact that some "therapists are more interested in intervening at the level of the nature of the stories families tell about themselves and their intrafamilial patterns of narration than in describing underlying psychological structures in individuals and families", can actually provide a sense of empowerment to older persons since the caregivers and the client can join forces to generate a new story of narrative. In Shindler's words,

"Unlike the 'modern' worker, the postmodern therapist does not conceptualize or intervene out of commitment to the belief in the existence of an underlying 'true' meaning or single theoretically valid interpretation of the client's story. The empowering process begins when the searching and meaning between worker and client is established such that the latter plays a major role in its interpretation of meaning".

Shindler, 1999: 166

The remaining parts of this paper attempt to embed the afore-mentioned issues in the context of older adult learning. After all, even Freire (1993) – especially in his later works - "sought to retreat from the totalising...narratives of modernism, oppression and emancipation to take account of the critiques of...postmodernism and recognise how inequalities of power are mediated by different subjectivities and situations with respect to differences" (Usher and Edwards, 1997 : 47). It thus attempts to situate a 'postmodernism of resistance' (Giroux and McLaren, 1994) in the context of older adult learning, an approach that "retain[s] the vision of Freire but also to move away from the dangers of previously identified tendencies towards theoretical vanguardism and the crude binarism represented by the stark alternatives of education for domestication or education for liberation" (Usher and Edwards, 1997: 47-48).

3. Personal transformation

The modern impetus underlying CEG means that it tends to neglect “the ‘meanings’ with which people imbue their lives and which colour their relations with others” (Layder, 1994: 57). This stance neglects that the field of adult education has a long tradition of personal transformation whereby learners experience higher levels of empowerment. Most famously, Mezirow (2001) argues that learners hold various world-views or perspectives as they relate to a number of personal and social issues ranging from democracy to beauty to education. For Mezirow, we can transform our perspectives in a safe environment, where reflection through dialogue on the fundamental premises that guide our lives, are challenged by the group members. Although it remains that this can only be done in a group or in social interaction as learners often need help uncovering undisclosed meaning schemes, higher levels of empowerment can be achieved without wider social structural transformations. Indeed, the four criteria for assessing the occurrence of empowerment can also be situated in the personal realm. In Scott’s words,

“For personal transformational learning, structural change occurs in the psyche of individuals. The structure of the psyche involves an awareness of or conceptual understanding of the ‘self’...In postmodern times there are multiple selves, each one of which may hold different interests, respond differently to conditions and contribute to a decentred self or divided self in a fragmented society which no longer holds agreed-upon standards or mores. The aim of personal transformation is to align various disparate parts of the self to gain coherence, peace and a sense of wholeness. This promotes a sense of freedom and authenticity to meaningful work and activity in the social sphere”.

Scott, 1996: 183

4. Reconceptualising power

In many respects, CEG is also at fault for clinging to a traditional view of social power characterised by a zero-sum theory of collective movements. In CEG, empowerment is often determined as something that is done to others, that people do to others. Despite the good intentions of those who seek to empower others, the relations of empowerment are themselves relations of power. As Solas (1994) suggested, some of the key assumptions, goals and practices of empowerment can function to perpetuate power relations between social workers and clients. In this respect, the coming of postmodern social structures lead us to embrace Foucault’s (1977) stance that a dichotomous, binarist, understanding of power, which suggests the polarisation of categories such as ‘powerful’ and ‘powerful’, is insufficient to understand how the process of domination and empowerment operate in contemporary times. Foucault’s (1980) analysis of power locates it, not in a sovereign body but in a more diffuse assembly of groupings. He maintains that the main focus of analysis should be the local and regional points of power rather

than the its concentration or centralised forms. Although some argue that Foucault's (ibid.) stance dissolves the possibility of subaltern groups increasing their levels of empowerment and emancipation, Pease (2002) rightly argues that to acknowledge that power is diffused is not the same as accepting that people's power is equal as his writings do acknowledge global forms of domination. Foucault's insight, which in many ways highlight the shortcomings of CEG, is his concern with the way that global forms of power are influenced by decentralised and localised forms of power. In Pease's words,

"One of the implications of Foucault's analysis of power for political struggle is a questioning of the strategy of unified, organized mass action. Mass political movements in this view may not be the most effective forms of social change. Rather smaller groups of activists may be more successful in bringing about change than large-scale organizations...if power and control are not vested in any central point, then resistance does not arise from one single point...We bring about social change through local struggles that undermine institutional power where it reveals itself in ideology under the mask of humanism, or as it operates in homes, schools, prisons, and factories".

Pease, 2002: 139-140

5. Rethinking empowerment

The reconceptualisation of power, away from a modernist to a postmodernist agenda, warrants a rethinking of 'self-empowerment' in older adult learning. It is important that adult educators consider individual differences among learners in their understanding of power and empowerment. This is because what is empowering for one person may not be everyone's cup of tea. There are two commonsensical yet important ways to consider individual differences as we think about learner empowerment:

"One is to help learners develop an awareness of their own learning style, psychological type, values and preferences. Understanding oneself is a component of critical self-reflection, so this serves two purposes - fostering self-awareness and empowering people to make decisions as to how they learn best. The *second* important strategy is for educators to develop an awareness of how learners vary in their preferences and to incorporate this awareness into everything we do. This does not mean that we need to develop four or eight or sixteen ways of doing everything, but rather that we are conscious of the variety of responses to what we do and how the same act on our part can lead to completely different reactions".

Cranton, 2006: 131 - *italics* added

In practice, learner self-awareness can be augmented informally or more systematically through various inventories. Informally, a variety of activities can be used - such as values-based simulations, critical incidents, and role plays, for example - value-based simulations, critical incidents, and role plays, or even simple discussion and questioning – all of which can help learners become aware of their preferences. For instance, attempting

“(...) to push an introverted learner to be ‘heard’ in a discussion circle is disempowering, not empowering. Asking someone who is thoughtful and analytical to express deeply personal emotions may increase self-surveillance and even lead a student to invent things to please the teacher... [On the other hand] encouraging someone who is extraverted and prefers to learn by doing to engage in quiet self-reflection or the contemplation of abstract and theoretical issues will similarly feel disempowering to the individual”.

Cranton, 2006: 133

In summary, it is important that educators do not assume that all individuals respond in the same manner to empowering strategies. Individual’s values, learning styles, past experiences, as well as personality preferences, contribute to how they will come to become empowered and how they will respond to educator’s efforts to help them achieve higher levels of self-empowerment (Cranton, 2006).

6. Case study

In an effort to embed the above reflections in a praxeological framework, I coordinated an elder-learning programme in Dingli, a village situated in the western region of Malta, whose rationale and curriculum was based on postmodern, rather than critical, epistemological principles. In short, the course did not seek to lead towards social empowerment, whereby learners are encouraged to change the immediate social structures. Rather, the course endeavoured to help older learners to gain more individual forms of empowerment - in other words, to equip them with individual skills that will render them more capable to manipulate the surrounding structures in line with their goals and objectives.

The title of the learning programme was *Improving financial capability provision in later life*. Following NIACE’s (2008) briefing sheet, the course aimed at taking account of the changing personal, financial, management skills required by older persons. Indeed, the many new financial products available are forcing people to make complex decisions, even for the simplest every day transactions. For instance, the sudden spread of ‘Chip and Pin’, which requires being able to remember numbers and its almost mandatory use in many locations, is a contemporary illustration of a new process to be understood and assimilated by older people. Undoubtedly, this rapidly changing scenario makes it all the more vital to remind education practitioners, policy

makers and funders of the financial literacy needs of older people. This course on *Improving Financial Capability Provision in Later life* identified the three core competencies for developing a financial capability curriculum for older persons - namely, financial planning, problem solving, and decision-making (ibid.). In other words, a financially capable person would possess an understanding of the key concepts central to money management, which include:

- a working knowledge of financial institutions, systems and services;
- a range of skills both general and specific to areas of finance;
- a more positive awareness of the short and longer-term consequences of personal finance decisions, and ability to assess risks;
- attitudes that allow effective and responsive management of financial affairs;
- the confidence to engage in the various financial processes that are encountered on a regular basis.

NIACE, 2008: 2

The specific objectives of the course included the following:

- provide an opportunity and environment for older people to identify and highlight their diverse range of financial capability needs;
- involve groups of older people in reviewing and testing existing financial capability resources in terms of content, presentation, suitability and delivery;
- trial alternative ways of meeting financial capability needs through adapting existing material or by creating new material to deliver to the group;
- investigate the role of key financial organisations, older people's organisations and education providers in ensuring financial advice and guidance was available...;
- develop ways to use the work through local structures and explore the possibility of an older people's forum and the embedding of financial capability issues; [and]
- identify funding for future financial capability provision for older people.

NIACE, 2008: 4

The course, which was free and open to everybody over the age of 50 took place over four sessions of two hours each spread over four weeks. Sixteen participants, ten female and six males, took part in the course. The average age of the participants was 65 years old, with the youngest and oldest participants being 61 and 77 years old respectively. Refreshments were available for each session before, during, and even after the session. Specific information about the aim and objectives of each session, based upon NIACE (2006), are listed below:

Session 1 choosing a bank, simple interest rate comparison, multi-factor accounts
(isolating what matters to you)

- Session 2 cheque writing, cheque writing practice, cheques - spot the mistakes, paying-
in slips - example, paying-slips – practice
- Session 3 statement - running totals, statement - credit and debit, credit cards, secure
online shopping
- Session 4 borrowing money using, discuss ways to borrow, understanding bills, ATM
withdrawals and depositing, evaluation of course.

Reflecting the findings of other programmes (e.g. Help the Aged, quoted in NIACE, 2008), it resulted that most older people budgeted and still preferred to budget on a weekly basis, and cash was the preferred payment method for most goods and services. Moreover, it was evident that older persons relied heavily on the local post office as both a means of accessing cash and paying bills. Indeed, only a minority of had set up direct debits to pay their bills, and many resisted using direct debits, mainly because they were worried about not having enough money in their account to cover any outgoings. The course was a resounding success, with many participants voicing their satisfaction with the learning objectives and outcomes:

“We need more similar courses. My husband and I really enjoyed the course. Actually, not only did we enjoy the sessions but we also found them very useful to our lives. Nobody tells you anything how the financial system works. They just expect you to invest money without asking any questions”.

older learner, female, 67 years old

“The only problem with the course was that it was too short. It was fantastic but we need more sessions. Banks should offer and fund such courses to all their customers, but especially older persons. It is not enough to be given a brochure or to receive the ATM card with a list of instructions. We need somebody to answer our questions and queries”.

older learner, male, 77 years old

“This course hit the nail on its head. I do not want to approach friends, neighbours, or even my children, with questions about [financial] matters. These are very private matters. Why should I show my bank statement to anybody? Why

shouldn't the bank tell me how everything works through such courses as these?"

older learners, female, 70 years old

Despite the fact that the course never intended to change the surrounding financial context in which older persons are embedded, during the final session many participants claimed to having experienced an improvement in their quality of life:

"My life has changed for the better since I attended the course. Now I feel confident and secure enough to withdraw and deposit money through the ATM machine. I never used the card before. As a result of the course, I do not have to go through an hour bus ride to either withdraw or deposit money or to ask for an account statement".

older learner, female, 69 years old

"Thanks to this course I now know how to write cheques to settle various payments. I used to take the bust to settle the payments in cash. This was very inconvenient for me as I do not drive or own a car. I am also aware of the various deposit accounts that exist, and as a result, of those which are most suitable to my needs. I am no longer afraid that bank employees will trick me or take for a ride".

older learner, female, 71 years old

"Last week I bought my first books online. When I received them yesterday, I felt so good, so proud, so independent, so in control. I no longer have to badger my son to get me the books I am interested in. This coming Christmas I plan to buy as much presents from *ebay* as possible. Stuff is so cheap on *ebay*. Who knows? I might book a holiday online as well".

older learners, female, 62 years old

Conclusion

This paper was intended as an invitation to reshaping and reconsidering the ways in which empowerment in later life can be achieved. Through its theoretical argumentation plus case study it shows that CEG is not the only means whereby older learners can experience empowerment. This is because there exists two dimensions of empowerment - namely, structural and subjective. Whilst there is no doubt to the improvement of older people's lives when social structures are altered in a way that facilitate and improve the lives of older persons, empowerment can also be achieved if older persons are awarded the necessary skills to manipulate their immediate environment to their advantage.

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