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The Tyranny of Academic Fashion: A Reject's Lament

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Preamble

Michael Newman has been making a distinctive and internationally recognized contribution to radical adult education and social action for over 40 years. His books include *Adult Education and Community Action* (1975), *The Poor Cousin: A Study of Adult Education* (1979), *The Third Contract: Theory and Practice in Trade Union Training* (1993), *Defining the Enemy: Adult Education in Social Action* (1994), *Maeler's Regard: Images of Adult Learning* (1999) and *Teaching Defiance: Stories and Strategies for Activist Educators* (2006). In this article he reflects upon his recent experience of being 'denied publication' by a 'learned' academic journal – and what this tells us about what we're up against today and how we must continue to struggle for what we believe in, however academically unfashionable this may be. Now more than ever, adult education needs 'eccentrics and enthusiasts' to challenge and counteract the common sense of the era. (Ian Martin, Honorary Fellow University of Edinburgh)

A worrying memory

I remember seeing a film with Anthony Hopkins playing an elderly mathematician. As a young man he had broken new ground. Now he feels his inspiration has returned, and he calculates with a passion, only to realise when others look over his work that he has been writing nonsense!

In the early part of 2011, I wrote an article and submitted it to a learned journal, which sent it out to three reviewers. I felt I had presented an argument well, so was surprised when the article was rejected. I tidied it up, broke one of the sections into

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two, and resubmitted. The article was rejected again. This time the official language from the journal was final: " … your manuscript has been denied publication."

Denied! Now I was worried. Had I, like Hopkins' mathematician, written rubbish? I reread the article, and two other articles I had recently published. All three made use of anecdote as well as analysis, messed around with philosophers and social theorists, and contained no empirical research. As far as I could see, my rejected article was on a par with the other two.

Reassurance

But the question remained. Had I lost the plot? Worse! Had I lost the plot to such a degree that I could not see that I had? I sent my article to an old friend, who I knew would pull no punches if she thought my article was rubbish. She wrote back reassuring me by talking of my article's "humanity", "hopefulness", and "eloquent argument." (Well, I did say she was a friend.)

My friend suspected that the reviewers had not engaged with my ideas, and she was right. None of them had challenged any of the arguments in the article. This was odd, because I had left myself open to attack. For example, in a section dealing with purpose, I made use of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre and, in so doing, was embracing the idea of free will. "Free will is a contested concept," one of the reviewers might have said. "What about the hooded prisoner in Abu Ghraib prison? Where's the free will in that?" In a section on reason, I referred to Jurgen Habermas. "Habermas is a rationalist," one of the reviewers might have said. "Our minds are too untidy. You'd be better off with the postmodernists!" But I am putting words into others' mouths. The reviewers said nothing of the sort, and, on matters of theory, they said nothing at all.

So where had I gone wrong? If the reviewers had nothing to say about my ideas and arguments, why had they taken against my article with such unanimity? The answer probably lies in the fact that all three had concentrated on matters of form and formality. And on matters of form and formality I am a heretic.

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Definitions

I was writing about "good non-credit adult education" and one of the reviewers wanted me to begin with a definition of the phrase. I dislike definitions. Many, if not most, are tautologies, written in leaden prose, and taking us nowhere much. A much quoted definition begins with these words: "Transformative learning is learning that transforms …" Surely, when we are writing to a specific audience, such as the readers of a learned journal, we can assume that the audience already has an interest in our subject and knows what we mean.

But there is more. Once we begin defining things, there is no knowing where to stop. We get trapped into a kind of *reductio ad absurdum.* Do I provide a definition of a whole phrase, in this case "good non-credit adult education"? Or should I define "non-credit adult education" or "non-credit" or "adult education" or "adult" or, heaven help us, "education"?

Communication is possible because language is a part of our lifeworld. We simply *know* what we and others mean. Providing definitions can be counter-productive. They render explicit the implicit understandings upon which we construct our lives. In this way they can disrupt the flow of an argument. We spend time and intellectual effort describing a particular phenomenon, rather than making reference to it naturally in our discourse.

Worse, definitions destroy the ambiguity upon which all communication is based. Once formulated, they tie us and our readers down to a single meaning. They limit our ability to imagine, to alter meanings as we go (as language does all the time), and to savour the insights that can occur with these alterations.

Literature reviews

Two of the reviewers wanted me to begin the article with a literature review. But literature reviews can clog up the opening section of an article and prevent us from taking our readers directly to the heart of the matter. And what do we actually mean

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by a literature review? Is it a review of all relevant literature? In which case we end up compiling an encyclopedia, and never get to write the article at all. Is it a kind of halfway house, in which we list some of the relevant literature but not all? In which case we are compiling an abridged encyclopedia, and may or may not get to the article later. Or is it a compilation of the two or three articles or books we deem particularly relevant? In which case we will cite these publications in the article anyway.

There is more. Literature reviews set the wrong tone. They mean that we start an article by looking backwards, and risk losing our readers before we say anything new.

And literature reviews are insulting in that they imply that our readers are incapable of doing a background search for themselves.

Conclusions

One reviewer wanted me to end with a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications of what I had said. The whole article was a discussion of theory and practice, and a conclusion of the kind the reviewer was suggesting would have been a repetition. Again, I have never understood why so many of our tribe end whatever they have been saying by saying it all over again! If the substantive part of the piece has been well argued, and the readers are equipped with moderately functioning memories, then there is no need to do this. And even if some memories are faulty, the readers have the article in front of them and can go back and read the relevant bits again.

This problem is compounded by the confusion of summary with conclusion. The writer may head the final paragraphs of the piece with the word “Conclusion” when in fact she or he is providing a summary. A conclusion is the final phase of an argument, the moment when all the pieces coalesce, and something new has been created. There is no clunky, unsatisfactory repetition here. If we have written well, we have arrived at a new insight. And sometimes this insight is best encapsulated in a story, or a description, or a couple of lines from a poem, or a metaphor.

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Register

One reviewer thought my article was too informal. This comment presumes that a particular style of writing is suitable to the world of academic literature, and other styles are not. But it is a presumption I do not share. Good academic writing is good clear writing. Nothing more and nothing less. I used to ask students new to the academic game to imagine that they were writing to an elderly aunt who read extensively, enjoyed great literature and police procedurals equally, and liked sentences that began with a capital letter and ended with a full stop.

You know your aunt well, I would say, but do not see her all that often, so you write to her with an easy familiarity tempered with respect. Avoid the passive voice unless it is really necessary because it distances both you and your aunt from the subject. If you are expressing your own opinion, use the first person. Use colloquialisms as much as you like, so long as they hit the nail smack on the head. Know that your aunt has several hundred more books she wants to read, so make what you write worth reading. Be succinct. And do not be afraid to use the words "I like …", as in "I like the existentialists' belief in free will", and the words "I do not like …"' as in "I do not like the critical theorists' concepts of the lifeworld". But make sure you say why.

If you have a writing block, I would go on, actually write the letter, opening with the words "Dear Aunty Florence". Or if you find that just too twee, write the assignment as a letter to me, opening with something like "Dear Mike, I am having real trouble getting started but I want to say that …" You can delete the opening sentences when you write the final draft.

And remember why you are writing. You want to make a case. You want to convince. You want to make your readers think like you. All writing worth reading is polemic, even if it is cleverly disguised. Pay no attention to academics who claim that they can write with objectivity and academic detachment. No one can.

Paragraphs

One reviewer thought many of my paragraphs were too short. But how long is a piece

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of string? If a paragraph has a clearly stated theme and elaborates well on that theme, then the paragraph is the length it is, and that is the length it should be. This reviewer suggested joining some of the paragraphs up. But if each paragraph has a separate theme, then joining them up may confuse, or antagonise, the reader.

It may be a truism, but content should dictate the form, and not the other way around. If we have something to say, if we have allowed our ideas to take shape, and if we approach the task with a tidy and untroubled mind, then the words will flow. And when the words flow, the chapters, paragraphs and sentences look after themselves.

I know of no rule that says a paragraph cannot be a single word.

No.

Nor, as far as I know, is there a rule saying that a paragraph cannot go on for the length of a book …

Balance

One reviewer said that, as well as good non-credit courses, there were bad ones, which could end in acrimony. I should, she or he said, make mention of this dark side. But why did the reviewer say this? Was it out of a belief that there should always be a balance: that if I write about the good, then I must also write about the bad, if I write about the pros, then I must write about the cons?

Searching for balance can lead us into traps. In my experience the light side of non-credit adult education has outweighed the dark literally a thousand-fold. I have been head of two adult education institutions, and only ever encountered a handful of disturbed individuals among the thousands of students who passed through those institutions during my tenure. I saw no reason to manufacture a balance that was not there.

I have never understood the need for balance. The readers of a learned journal are adults. They can go searching for the other side of things if they feel they have to. I prefer to concentrate on putting my own case, and to be as one-sided as I like. And I am certainly not going to state my opponents' case for them. Life, this accidental

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opportunity to make meaning, is too short.

Research

In my article I cited a small piece of informal research, in which a teacher set out to identify her students' motives for attending two of her classes. One reviewer felt the teacher's research did not contain the necessary "ingredients" of a research study. But why should an insight found in a small qualitative enquiry be less worthy than an insight found in a formal research project, with its pilot studies, random sampling, control groups, triangulation, statistical number crunching, and the rest of it? One of the teacher's students had said she attended her class "because I want to forget about the terrible day in the office today and that I'll have to get up tomorrow morning". It is unlikely that a research project of the current positivist bent would have elicited this office worker's anguished response. Imagine it. "Circle your answer: I like my work: 1. Strongly agree; 2. Agree; 3. Don't know; 4. Disagree … And random sampling may well have eliminated the student from the research altogether.

I sometimes think that we adult educators are too big for our boots when we talk about research. Adult education is not rocket science. There are precious few rules to be set, generalisations to be established, or hypotheses to be tested. People absorb new information, test it against their own experience, mull it over individually and/or in the company of others, and take what is interesting and useful away with them. There is not much in this everyday activity to be scientific about.

What makes the world of adult education so special is the extraordinariness of every single learning event, the uniqueness of every group that gathers to learn, and the distinctive nature of every learning outcome. If we can resist the temptation to prove ourselves to our scientific cousins, and simply write in wonder at the humanity of our field, all will be well. In this case our resources will be any and every field of knowledge we care to use. The ingredients of our research will be curiosity and delight. The qualities will be acuity of observation, clarity of description, and honesty of interpretation. And the goal will be to honour every act of learning, be it individual or collective. Any research we do will be qualitative, illuminative, speculative,

intuitive, and celebratory.

Learning is central to the mysterious business of being, and being is an entirely personal phenomenon. We cannot experience someone else's being, and we cannot experience the effect that learning has on someone else's being. If we could, we would become that other person. In writing about learning, then, we may draw from others' accounts of their experience, but we can only write with authority about our own. And that writing, by definition, will be subjective.

And so, to my title

My friend, Peter Willis, calls the concern with form and formality "the tyranny of academic fashion".

A paradox

Those of us with a passion for adult education are living through paradoxical times.

Adult education is everywhere, provided by government departments concerned with land care, road safety, health, ageing, transport, communications, you name it, in land rights and reconciliation programmes, in book discussion groups, political parties, prisons, on activist websites like Avaaz, in the workplace, in trade unions and employers' associations, in friends of a hospital, friends of an art gallery, friends of a zoo, in gyms and on sportsfields, in doctors' surgeries, pre-natal clinics, in the corners of coffee shops, in gardens and national parks, on the net, on the net, on the net, in cancer support groups, on the streets of Montreal, Madrid, London, Bangkok, Paris ... And a lot of this adult education is no longer voluntary. We need to go on learning throughout our adult lives. We enter new jobs, join new organizations, buy new bits of technology, and maintain our edge (or our licence to practise) in our profession by continually updating our knowledge and honing our skills.

This proliferation of adult education needs inventive adult educators to bring good practice and new insights to all of its forms. Yet amidst such a wealth of adult education, the institutions that promote adult education and the theories that inform it

are in decline. At universities, the study of adult education (and much else) has lost out to the obsession with business studies. In the world of leisure, the practice of adult education is losing out to the mind-dulling vacuity of social media and the instant gratification of the internet.

Aiming high

If we are to survive, we need to stop scrabbling around in the foothills, and start climbing the mountain again.

We need to hear from the eccentrics and enthusiasts. Studies of Freire still have a lot to give us. (Did he open *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* with a literature review?) What about writers like Astrid Von Kotze and her analyses of adult and development education in Africa (see the stunning report on a popular education initiative in South Africa she has recently published on the Popular Education Network), and the ever-cheerful, ever astute Danny Wildermeersch and his writings on inclusion and exclusion, the risk society, lifelong learning and everything else? What about the towering work of Jane Thompson, the rigorous and profound writing of Peter Mayo (see his latest major work on Freire), and the inspiring, lateral thinking of Peter Willis? Get Mechthild Hart back. What about that mob in the Department of Informal Education at Chulalongkorn University who were fusing Buddhist problem-solving with western adult learning theory? Are they still going? And the Popular Education Network, carefully tended by Jim Crowther. We need bubbling enthusiasts like Larry Nolan Davis. Do you remember his *Planning, Conducting, Evaluating Workshops*? We need to bring on the young and the new. And please, oh please, let's not go down the gurgler worrying about the length of a piece of string …

Postscript

I found a home for my shop-soiled article in *Concept,* 2013, Vol. 4, No.2. You can download it free of charge, at
http://concept.lib.ed.ac.uk/index.php/Concept/article/view/235