

**Undermining the Very Democracy We Seek to Create:
Discussion Practices in Adult Education and the Dangers of Repressive Tolerance
EXCERPT**

Stephen Brookfield

STUDIES IN CONTINUING EDUCATION Vol. 27, #2, (2005)

As an adult educator who uses discussion as a mainstay of my practice I try to keep in mind certain theoretical illuminations that have emerged from an analysis of my own experiences. But I also realize that experiential analysis cannot account for everything that happens in my world, and that theoretical insights drawn from external sources can illuminate aspects of discussion practice that are hidden from me. One of the most productively disturbing bodies of theoretical work for adult education is critical theory. And perhaps the most disturbing of all critical theory's ideas for discussion-based teaching is Herbert Marcuse's (1965) analysis of repressive tolerance.

A Vignette of Repressive Tolerance

It is a graduate course on philosophies and practices of adult education. The instructor announces that this semester the curriculum will be broadened to include perspectives on the field that deliberately challenge the liberal/progressive hegemony. To that end the course will include a unit on Africentrism as well as the more expected units on Humanist Adult Education and Workplace Learning. Three teams of students are formed with each team taking responsibility for researching their unit and then presenting their findings to the rest of the course, and to the wider field. The latter objective will be achieved by each group proposing a paper based on their research for presentation at the annual state adult education conference.

As the semester proceeds it becomes clear that some of the groups are having problems gaining access to resources. In particular, some of the core texts for the groups studying Africentrism are either incredibly expensive or unavailable in the university library. The Africentric group spends hours, without success, trying to locate a copy of two out of print texts crucial to their presentation: *Philosophy Born of Struggle* (Harris, 1983) and *Confronting Racism and Sexism* (Hayes and Colin, 1994). As the class engages in a direct discussion of ideas covered in the three units an interesting dynamic develops. Practices derived from Humanist Adult Education and Workplace Learning are discussed at length as participants provide numerous examples of how these do, or do not, fit their own work contexts. Connections are drawn, contradictions are pointed out, and students struggle to appreciate fully the practice implications drawn from these perspectives. After each class meeting the course chat room is full of requests for citations of texts referred to in class. Students also use the list serve to post their reflections on how ideas derived from classroom discussions have already influenced their daily understandings and practices.

When ideas drawn from the Africentric paradigm are discussed, however, the emotional tenor seems to change. Even though participants profess themselves to be open to exploring this tradition, Africentric concepts and practices are regrettably dismissed by participants as inapplicable to the primarily White or Asian contexts within which they

work. Africentrism is discussed but the time devoted to this, and the number of questions asked about it, pale in comparison to the time spent discussing andragogy, the learning organization, or self-directed work teams. On the weekly classroom evaluation forms completed anonymously by students the comments regarding Humanist Adult Education and Workplace Learning are substantive, referring to the clear connections between these perspectives and students' practices, or to the difficulties encountered when trying to act on these ideas. On the few times comments appear on the evaluation forms concerning the Africentric paradigm, the main theme is how disappointing it is that such a rich tradition is unfortunately inapplicable to the students' settings.

At the end of the semester the three groups apply for spots to present at the annual state adult education conference. All three paper proposals are accepted. However, when the schedule conference is published it seems the Africentric group is placed in a pre-conference caucus on multiculturalism that is not in the main conference. The groups proposing papers on Humanistic Adult Education and Workplace Learning, on the other hand, find their papers situated in the main body of the conference. When a person from the Africentric group contacts the conference organizer to point out that the group applied to be part of the main conference she is told that the committee assumed a session on Africentrism was meant for the pre-conference multiculturalism caucus. The committee decided that the writers of the proposal must have misunderstood the form. She is also told that all the main conference spots have now been filled but that the committee will agree to the Africentric group preparing a special alternative poster session that interested participants can attend. Unfortunately, the only time a room is available for this session is during the wrap-up plenary session when a major figure in the field has been specially invited to address the conference.

The Concept of Repressive Tolerance

This vignette illuminates a theoretical perspective – repressive tolerance - that is particularly problematic for adult educators committed to using discussion. This perspective is associated with Herbert Marcuse, the highly influential philosopher and public intellectual of the 1960's. Marcuse argued that teachers' willingness to run discussions in which a variety of perspectives are present is much less innocent than it appears. On the face of it this practice hardly seems like a problem. A broadening of discussion to include radical ideas seems an important and obvious part of building a critical practice of adult education. In one of his most famous essays, however, Marcuse (1965) argues that an emphasis on including a diversity of views and traditions in discussion is often repressive, not liberating. When they experience repressive tolerance, people mistakenly believe they are participating in discussions characterized by freedom of speech and an inclusive emphasis on diverse ideas, when in fact those same discussions actually reinforce dominant ideology.

Repressive tolerance is the tolerance, in the name of impartiality, fairness or even-handedness, of intolerable ideologies and practices, and the consequent marginalization of efforts for democratic social change. When repressive tolerance is in place the

apparent acceptance of all viewpoints only serves to reinforce an unfair status quo. This is because “tolerance is extended to policies, conditions and modes of behavior which should not be tolerated because they are impeding, if not destroying, the chances of creating an existence without fear and misery” (Marcuse, 1965, p. 82). In a society in which a small number of people hold a disproportionate amount of wealth and power, and in which ideological obfuscation ensures the reproduction of the system, tolerance only serves to legitimize dominant ideology. In Marcuse’s words, “the conditions of tolerance are ‘loaded’ ... determined and defined by the institutionalized inequality ... i.e. by the class structure of society” (ibid. p. 85). When “false consciousness has become the general consciousness” (ibid. p. 110) we have a “passive toleration of entrenched and established attitudes and ideas even if their damaging effect on man and nature is evident” (ibid. p. 85). In this way the apparently benign “ideology of tolerance ... in reality, favors and fortifies the conservation of the status quo of inequality and discrimination” (ibid. p. 123).

Repressive tolerance ensures the continuation of the system by allowing just enough challenge to the system to convince people that they live in a truly open society, while still maintaining the system’s structural inequity. It functions as a pressure cooker letting off enough steam to prevent the whole pot from boiling over. It is what Asante (1988), in his analysis of racism, calls process rather than institutional racism. Repressive tolerance allows, even celebrates, initiatives such as Black History month, affirmative action legislation and various diversity programs, but all the time process racism allows White supremacist society to “give the impression of running while standing still” (p. 35). When an alternative idea is included alongside a mainstream one, people’s prior familiarity with the mainstream ensures that the alternative, oppositional perspective is seen as an exotic option rather than a plausible natural center. In classroom discussions repressive tolerance allows, and even encourages, participants to express the widest possible range of views. In the manner of this apparently free expression of views, however, certain centrist views are always given greater credence. They are subtly favored, presented by both participants and leader as more ‘reasonable’ or ‘balanced’. So while alternative interpretations and opinions are pursued, the fact that they are framed as alternatives only serves to support the implicit legitimacy of the center.

One way to illustrate this is to think about what happens when those adult educators who can afford it travel abroad. Typically, when you get to a foreign country you are enraptured with the different aspects of the culture – the cuisine, the music, the clothing, the street rhythms, the language, and so on. You sample the food, go enthusiastically to street festivals, dress like a local – all the time reveling in celebrating the exotic diversity you are experiencing. But your enjoyment comes from precisely the awareness that this is not ‘normal’ not ‘reality’. You know you are on a temporary excursion into another perspective and that lurking behind your engagement is the ‘real’ life you inhabit. So the engagement is not with a truly viable alternative that might displace the center, but a temporary flirtation with an exotic diversion. In this way celebrating the diversity of your alternative experience serves only to reinforce the enduring legitimacy of your ‘normal’ way of life. In much the same way inserting the discussion of an alternative idea, concept or text into the consideration of familiar, mainstream materials serves only

to emphasize the alternatives as exotic others and to underscore the normality of the center. Learners see their engagement as a temporary flirtation with an exotic intellectual (rather than tourist) locale, an enjoyable diversion before returning to the security of mainstream thought.

How does repressive tolerance work? Essentially, repressive tolerance is hegemonic, a taken for granted notion embedded in the ideology of democracy. Corporations and media perpetuate a social mentality that accepts that things are organized for the good of all. But what counts as truth is pre-defined by these institutions so that avenues of opposition are subtly closed off. Marcuse argues that “under the rule of monopolistic media – themselves mere instruments of economic and political power – a mentality is created for which right and wrong, true and false are predefined wherever they affect the vital interests of the society” (1965, p. 95). Language – in contemporary terms, discursive practices and relations – is controlled to maintain oppression; “the meaning of words is rigidly stabilized ... the avenues of entrance are closed to the meaning of words and ideas other than the established one” (ibid. p. 96). Patriotism, democracy, justice – all these words are invested with only one possible ideological interpretation.

Repressive tolerance masks its repression behind the façade of open, even-handedness. Alternative ideas are not banned in discussions. Critical texts are published and critical messages circulated in those same discussions. The defenders of the status quo can point to the existence of dissenting voices (such as Marcuse’s) as evidence of the open society we inhabit, and the active tolerance of a wide spectrum of ideologies. But hegemony irresistibly frames all meaning in an unstoppable manner. As the vignette on repressive tolerance shows, sometimes the power of radical texts is diluted by the fact that the texts themselves are hard to get, or incredibly expensive. More likely the radical meanings those texts contain are neutered in any discussion of them because they are framed as the expressions of obviously weird minority opinion. Marcuse cites Orwell’s analysis of language in illustrating how words are used to mean their opposite. For example, the meaning of peace is redefined so that “preparing for war *is* working for peace” (Marcuse, 1965, p. 96). Supporters of the 2003 unilateral American invasion of Iraq frequently used this formulation.

A crucial component of repressive tolerance is the meta-narrative of democratic tolerance. This narrative is ideologically embedded in the way adult educators think of democratic discussion, where the intent is to honor and respect each learner’s voice. But the implicit assumption that all contributions to a discussion carry equal weight can easily lead to a flattening of conversation. A discussion leader’s concern to dignify each student’s personhood can result in a refusal to point out the ideologically skewed nature of particular contributions, let alone saying someone is wrong. In Marcuse’s view, the ideology of democratic tolerance in discussion groups means that “the stupid opinion is treated with the same respect as the intelligent one, the misinformed may talk as long as the informed, and propaganda rides along with falsehood. This pure tolerance of sense and nonsense is justified by the democratic argument that nobody, neither group nor individual, is in possession of the truth and capable of defining what is right and wrong, good and bad” (1965, p. 94).

Under repressive tolerance the airing of a radical perspective as one among many possible viewpoints to be considered in a discussion always works to the detriment of that perspective. This is because discussion participants are disposed to skepticism or hostility regarding new ideas because of their formative ideological conditioning. Thus “persuasion through discussion and the equal presentation of opposites (even where it is really equal) easily lose their liberating force as factors of understanding and learning; they are far more likely to strengthen the established thesis and to repel the alternatives” (Marcuse, 1965, p. 97). In a contemporary analysis of the discourse of multicultural inclusion San Juan Jr (2003) adopts a Marcusean posture by arguing that such discourse (and its related practices of celebrating diversity) only serve to affirm the legitimacy of the capitalist status quo. San Juan Jr is not referring here to the notion of critical multiculturalism expressed by Kanpol and McLaren (1995) amongst others, but to the ‘fun, food and festivals’ multiculturalism that celebrates individual differences as if they were devoid of power relations. Heretically (at least to many educators) Marcuse even suggests that with some people discussion is a waste of time. In his view “there are in fact large groups in the population with whom discussion is hopeless” (1970, p. 102) owing to the rigidity of their opinions. So the best thing to do, in Marcuse’s opinion, is avoid talking to them.

References

- Asante, M.K. 1988. *Afrocentricity*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.
- Harris, L. (ed.). 1983. *Philosophy born of struggle: Anthology of African-American philosophy from 1917*. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt.
- Hayes, E. and Colin, S.A.J. III (eds.). 1994. *Confronting racism and sexism*. New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education # 61. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Kanpol, B. and McLaren, P. (eds.) 1995. *Critical Multiculturalism: Uncommon Voices in a Common Struggle*. Westport, Connecticut: Bergin and Garvey.
- Marcuse, H. 1965. “Repressive tolerance”. In, R.P. Wolff, B. Moore, and H. Marcuse. *A critique of pure tolerance*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- San Juan Jr., E. 2002. *Racism and cultural studies: Critiques of multiculturalist ideology and the politics of difference*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.