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Are We Walking the Talk? Questions of Structure and Agency in the Research on Teaching in Adult Education

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Abstract: *Despite current prevalence of constructivist epistemologies, the practice of teaching adults continues to reflect representational approaches to meaning. In this roundtable discussion, we explore the use of Giddens' theory of structuration as a framework for deepening our understanding of the lack of change in teaching.*

Constructivist epistemologies have had a significant influence on how we think about teaching and learning, as evident from numerous faculty development programs for teachers working with adult learners in postsecondary education settings. Teachers are encouraged to place more emphasis on *constructing* rather than *representing meaning* (Mezirow, 1991), to involve their learners actively in this meaning-making process (Bonwell & Sutherland, 1996), to integrate content across disciplines and within learners' life contexts (Dirkx & Prenger, 1997), and to foster transformative learning among their students (Cranton, 1994, 1997). Despite this prominent turn in research and theory, however, toward constructivist, contextual, and transformative learning, change in the actual practice of teaching adults has been painfully slow (Nesbitt, 1996). Techniques associated with constructivist and transformative approaches to teaching are often appropriated by practitioners within traditional conceptions of teaching (Quigley & Holsinger, 1993). Hence, "active" and "collaborative" learning strategies often become, in effect, little more than instrumentally-oriented techniques to more effectively transmit pre-determined forms of knowledge to unwitting learners. Activities grounded in constructivist theories of meaning reflect, instead, representational approaches to meaning (Mahoney, 1991). Fundamental change in the practice of teaching adults proceeds at a glacial pace, if at all.

Problem and Focus

This roundtable discussion focuses on developing a better understanding of this apparent lack of change in teaching environments for adult learners. We

elaborate this problem from three different contexts: graduate adult education, developmental education, and university faculty development. These settings represent different ways in which this problem expresses itself. In this summary, we briefly elaborate this problem and how we might use structuration theory to help better understand these issues.

The structures in which educators work profoundly shape their choices. A teacher may be committed to an emancipatory agenda but she may be working within organizational contexts shaped by fundamentally different values. These contexts are often significantly influenced by economic matters, derived from their federal funding. New initiatives, such as fostering self-directed learning, might appeal to a teacher who is on a path of exploration about teacher-learner relationships, or who is questioning aspects of traditional or dominant models of education. But the underlying values shaping this aim are largely economic. Transformative or emancipatory aims are often at odds with the larger economic context in which these practices are embedded.

At an individual level, fundamental change in teaching practice also elicits a number of challenges. The thought of entertaining fundamental change can be frightening and scary. Not many educators are willing to engage the hard and confusing work that is needed to challenge traditional epistemologies and approaches. Many also lack the support, space, and safety needed to change their practices. Learners also present teachers with potential challenges to implementing change. While some may be open to active, reflective approaches, others are much less willing to stray from familiar paths. When teaching is framed from this individual

perspective, change is often difficult to fully engage and sustain.

Structure and Agency in Changing Teaching Practice

Building on the work of Nesbitt (1996, 1998), we use Giddens' (1991) theory of structuration to help deepen our understanding of this change process among teachers of adults. Giddens suggests that *social structures*, in which teaching practice is embedded, can be both constraining and enabling, sources we use for both producing and reproducing actions within social settings. Similarly, *agency* reflects our capacity to act and be acted upon by social forces. We explore each of these "sources" of resistance, in terms of how they represent expression of teachers' meanings and intentions, and the broader social structures in which these practices are embedded. Using structuration theory, we might ask how student behaviors reflect aspects of the broader social context of which they are a part. Similarly, if we approach the relationship of individual teacher thought processes and values and the organizational context as recursively interconnected (Nesbit, 1998), we might better understand faculty members' fear of colleague and student reactions to their use of transformative pedagogy. Reluctance of developmental education teachers to let go of disciplinary boundaries which define their work might also be approached by attempting to understand more deeply how their beliefs about curriculum reflect and are bound up with the broad social structures in which they teach this content (Dirkx, Amey, & Haston, 1999). We focus on both insight into and critique of structuration theory, as it reflects a conceptual framework for fostering greater understanding of the problem of change in the practice of teaching adult learners.

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