

# Self-Directed Learning, Political Clarity and the Critical Practice of Adult Education

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At a time of recession in the American economy, most industries would envy a record of quantitative growth as impressive as that represented in the scholarly writing on self-directed learning. From once being regarded as a vaguely anarchistic, Illichian inspired, threat to established adult education, self-direction is now comfortably ensconced inside the citadel, firmly part of the conceptual and practical mainstream. We have so many people working on self-directed learning that their numbers support a commission of professors of adult education task force on this topic, and an annual international symposium devoted solely to research and theory in the area (Long and Associates, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991). For those unfamiliar with the field there are scholarly meta-analyses and critical reviews of research and theory (Caffarella and O'Donnell, 1990; Candy, 1991; Brockett and Hiemstra, 1991) as well as 'expert commentary on essential concepts' (Confessore and Confessore, 1992). The marriage between self-direction and adult education is long past the seven year itch and seems to have settled into a comfortable and harmonious rut. Epistemologically contradictory approaches to researching self-direction co-exist like partners who know each other's faults but have decided that something flawed is better than nothing at all. Hence, we can see a phenomenologically inclined naturalism sitting next to a quantitative positivism without any visible rancour between them. What contentiousness exists is mostly confined to debates concerning the reliability and validity of measurement scales (Field, 1989; Guglielmino, Long and McCune, 1989; Bonham, 1991; Field, 1991).

As with the most idyllic of marriages, however, there are occasional arguments and disagreements that surface to disturb the peace. In this paper I want to build on those moments of dissension and dissatisfaction that have occasionally emerged to disturb the equanimity of adult educators who align themselves with the idea of self-direction. In different ways these productively troubling elements have been expressed by Gelpi (1979), Griffin (1983, 1987), Candy (1989, 1991) and Hammond and Collins (1991) and they center chiefly on the fact that the political context, cultural contingency and social construction of self-directed learning activities have generally been ignored. Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) write that 'concerns about the sociopolitical dimension of self-direction remain valid today' (p. 97) and they note as one of their concluding recommendations for theory that "the political dimension of self-direction continues to be largely overlooked by adult educators and this needs to be remedied" (p. 220). In building on the criticisms this group of authors make, this paper has two purposes. First, I want to argue that critical adult educators may be making a strategically premature decision to dismiss self-directed learning as wholly

accommodative and therefore having no contribution to make to building a critical practice of adult education. Given the popularity of the concept in contemporary adult education, some important consequences could ensue for the field if it were reframed with a critical edge. We could miss an important tactical opening in the fight for a critical practice of adult education if we conclude too decisively that self-directed learning as an idea has been so hopelessly compromised that it can only function as an agent of domestication. Second, I want to make explicit what I see as the political dimensions to the idea in the belief that if adult educators acknowledge these it could affect fundamentally how many of them practice their craft. These arguments are, I believe, interconnected and they suggest that the concept of self-directed learning, if interpreted politically, could play an important role (along with critical theory, critical pedagogy and other work on transformative and emancipatory education) in providing a rationale for a critical practice of adult education.

## **Self-Directed Learning: An Accomodative or Emancipatory Idea?**

To critical theorists such as Griffin (1983, 1987) and Collins (1988, 1991) the predominance of the concept of self-directed learning illustrates the tendency of humanistic adult educators to collapse all political questions into a narrowly reductionist technical rationality. From a critical perspective, the co-opting of the early free spirit of self-direction into a masked form of repressive practice can be seen as yet one more example of the infinite flexibility of hegemony, of the workings of a coldly efficient repressive tolerance. An alternative form of practice that began as a challenge to institutionally arranged adult educational provision has become technocratic and accommodative. Griffin argues that discourse on self-direction is totally disconnected from questions of power and control in society and that it illustrates the misguided tendency of humanistic adult educators to depoliticise and decontextualize all practice into a concern for personal growth. Similarly, Collins writes that "far from empowering adult students, self-directed learning strategies steer them to a negotiated compromise with predominant interests which support social conformity" (1988, p. 63). He dismisses adult educators who subscribe to self-directed learning techniques such as learning contracts as willing collaborators in a sublimation of individual needs to institutional interests. In rejecting the technicist interpretation of self-directed learning, he also seems to reject the possibility that this concept can be re-framed as part of an emancipatory interpretation of adult education. As the title of an Adult Education Research Conference paper he delivered implies, the choice for Collins is between *Self-directed learning or an emancipatory practice of adult education* (Collins, 1988), with these two posed as mutually exclusive options. However, the project of building a critical practice of adult education is one that can be approached in a number of ways. Before concluding that the idea of self-direction has no contribution to make this work I wish to explore an alternative approach to its conceptualization. This approach argues that self-direction can be interpreted as an inherently political idea, an oppositional, counter-hegemonic force. If the powerful political underpinnings to the idea could be made explicit this could play a substantial role in awakening the critical spirit in mainstream adult education.

Dismissing all adult educators who subscribe to ideas and practices of self-directed learning as uncritical dupes, pedagogic lackeys of oppressive interests, demeans a

great many committed practitioners working towards goals they would view as emancipatory. Certainly, it is quite possible to advocate self-directed approaches in good conscience, only to discover later that our efforts have served to bolster the oppressive structures that we thought we were opposing. It is possible, too, to have a good heart, boundless energy and a deep well of compassion, but to lack political clarity. Most of us find it difficult to discern the wider political forces and structures shaping our practice. Coming to an awareness of oppressive assumptions embedded in our own actions is something many of us, myself included, would often prefer to avoid. But most adult educators who stand behind the concept of self-direction do so because they sense that there is something about this form of practice that dignifies and respects people and their experience, and that tries to break with authoritarian forms of education. They sense that if self-direction means anything it means that control over definitions, processes and evaluations of learning rests with the people who are struggling to learn and not with external authorities. There are strains of libertarian and communitarian thought here, a recognition that learning should spring from, honor, and critique the experiences of those engaged in this activity. When asked to articulate a rationale for self-direction adult educators use terms like 'empowerment' or 'transformation' and they argue that through self-directed methods adults gain an increasing sense (however naive this might subsequently be shown to be) that they are in control of their own lives. Through focusing on the political dimensions of self-directed learning, these same adult educators could become more aware of the social construction of adult educational knowledge and practice. I believe that it is well worth the effort to try to reframe the idea in a way that emphasises the individual's standing against repressive interests. In this effort I build on Gelpi's (1979) view that "self-directed learning by individuals and of groups is a danger for every repressive force, and it is upon this self-direction that we must insist .... radical change in social, moral, aesthetic and political affairs is often the outcome of a process of self-directed learning in opposition to the educational message imposed from without" (p. 2).

## **Self-Directed Learning, Critical Practice and American Culture**

In the contemporary literature of adult education, the most common approach towards developing a critical practice of adult education focuses on explicating the adult educational relevance of the work of European critical theorists and political economists, especially Jurgen Habermas (Collins, 1985; Mezirow, 1981, 1990; Welton, 1991; Little, 1991) and, perhaps less prominently, Antonio Gramsci (Ledwith, 1984; Armstrong, 1988; Morgan, 1987; Homen, 1989). As work on this valuable project continues it is important also to try to develop, simultaneously, approaches to a critical practice of adult education that are framed in terms that are perceived by American adult educators as being more familiar and congenial and that represent what seem to them to be some indigenous American intellectual traditions - even if these traditions turn out to be much more polymorphous than they imagined. If there is one thing that we have learned from activist adult educators like Horton and Freire it is that we must start (though not stay) where people are; that we must bring them to an uncomfortable and often unsought confrontation with inequitous political realities, and with their own unacknowledged collusions in these realities, by grounding this activity in terms and processes which look, feel, sound and smell close

to home. In Horton's (1990) words, "if you have to make a choice between moving in the direction you want to move people, and working with them where they are, you always choose to work with them where they are" (p. 112). Myles believed that "you have to start from where people are, because their growth is going to be from there, not from some abstraction or where you are or someone else is" (p. 131).

A strong case for the development of indigenous language and forms of analysis to undergird a critical practice of education in the United States has been made by Maxine Greene (1986). Greene writes that, "the sources of European critical theory are to be found in responses to the destruction of the Workers' Councils after the First World War, the decline of the Weimar Republic, the rise of Stalinism, the spread of fascism, the Holocaust, the corruptions of social democracy" (p. 437). These memories, she argues, are European, not American. Hence, for Greene, "a critical pedagogy relevant to the United States today must go beyond - calling on different memories, repossessing another history" (p. 438). That movements of European critical theory and American pragmatism might not be as separate as some believe has been pointed out by various writers (Antonio, 1989; Bernstein, 1991; Shalin, 1992). Bernstein (1991), for example, maintains that "Pervading all of Habermas' writings is his strong and unshakeable commitment to democracy. No less than John Dewey, Habermas is the philosopher of democracy. This is one of the reasons why he has been so drawn to the American pragmatic tradition, especially Pierce, Mead, and Dewey" (p. 207). Habermas' himself declares that "I have for a long time identified myself with that radical democratic mentality which is present in the best American traditions and articulated in American pragmatism" (1985, p. 198) and he describes Deweyan inspired pragmatism as "a missing branch of Young Hegelianism" (1986, p. 193) and "the radical-democratic branch of Young-Hegelianism" (p. 151). Bernstein (1991), believes that "Habermas is profoundly right in recognizing that the basic intuition or judgment that stands at the center of his own vision is also central to the pragmatic tradition. Both share an understanding of rationality as intrinsically dialogical and communicative. And both pursue the ethical and political consequences of this form of rationality and rationalization" (p. 48). Shalin (1992) too, argues that far from pragmatism and critical theory standing in opposition, "Habermas' *Theory of Communicative Action* can be seen as an attempt to invigorate critical theory by merging the Continental and Anglo-Saxon traditions and bringing the pragmatist perspective to bear on the project of emancipation through reason" (p. 244).

If, ultimately, very little in the American intellectual melting pot is wholly American in the sense of being free from some form of European influence (after all, those most American of adult educators - Eduard Lindeman and Myles Horton - were both strongly influenced by the Danish Folk High school movement) there are, nonetheless, certain cultural values that Americans claim as their own.

Perhaps the strongest of these is individualism; a belief that each of us can, with sufficient effort, create a world sensitive to our instincts and desires. Undeniably the concept does have its darker side - a narcissistic self absorption which cuts us off from our collective humanity, communitarian spirit and essential interdependence (Bellah et. al., 1985). Barbara Ehrenreich (1990) writes that in this conception of individualism "each self is seen as pursuing its own trajectory, accompanied by its own little planetary system of values, seeking to negotiate the best possible deal from the various 'relationships' that come along. Since all values appear to be idiosyncratic

satellites of the self, and since we have no way to understand the "self" as a product of all the other selves - present and in historical memory - we have no way of engaging each other in moral discourse, much less in a routine political argument" (p. 102). But although individualism can be a divisive, repressive idea, it also contains a strong libertarian streak, a belief that people should control their own environments and destinies rather than having these framed by external authorities. This conception of individualism can be seen in a kind of optimism regarding the contingency and malleability of our personal and political environments. People's belief that by their own efforts they can affect their futures provides a form of moral and civic courage that fuels the fires of change.

In adult education's interpretation of individualism - that is, in self-direction - the currents of moral and political optimism can flow strongly. By attending to the oppositional elements embedded in these ideas we are able to create some important strategic openings for building critical practice in the field. If issues of power and control are seen as central to an analysis of individualism, and if discussions of self-direction focus on the need for people to be responsible for framing their own choices and taking their own decisions rather than ceding these responsibilities to others, then programs which espouse self-direction will have to address the politically contentious questions of voice, relevance and authority. Moreover, these questions will be seen to spring from what most Americans would consider to be an appropriate concern with issues of democratic control. For example, taking the pledge of allegiance's call for 'liberty and justice for all' seriously has enormously radical implications, yet one could hardly be regarded as an alien subversive when justifying one's efforts as an activist by these words. In this regard it is interesting to note Greene's efforts to trace the libertarian impulse to individualism back to the republic's founders. Greene writes that "the founders were calling, through a distinctive critical challenge, for opportunities to give their energies free play. That meant the unhindered exercise of their particular talents: inventing, exploring, building, pursuing material and social success" (1986, p. 430). She turns to Thoreau who, she believes, wanted people "to reject their own self-exploitation, to refuse what we would now call false consciousness and artificial needs. He connected the 'wide-awakeness' to actual work in the world, to projects. He knew that people needed to be released from internal and external constraints if they were to shape and make and articulate, to leave their own thumbprints on the world" (p. 432). Dewey, too, she argues, was well aware of "what would later be called 'hegemony', or the ideological control, implicit in the dominant view of a given society" (p. 434).

The constitution, pledge of allegiance, Thoreau, Dewey - to radical educators these may seem like overly romanticised, politically neutered beginnings for critical practice. Yet, it remains the case that mainstream educators will take seriously critical interpretations of their work that spring from such revered - even reified - sources. Clear points of connection between critical theory and adult education can certainly be elaborated in efforts such as Collins' (1991) or De Marais' (1991) interpretations of these ideas in highly concrete ways, and this is crucial to the political project of building a critical practice of adult education. But, given that so many adult educators see self-direction as a defining concept for their work, there is also some merit in pursuing concurrently a strategy that reinterprets this familiar idea in a more critical way. If the political dimensions to the idea of self-direction could be made explicit, this could have a powerful effect on the way many people think and act as adult

educators. For all the accommodative potential so skillfully identified by Collins and Griffin, there is still something intrinsically critical, freeing and empowering to many people about the idea of self-direction. People understand that embedded in the idea is some strain of resistance that sets adult educators in opposition to powerful interests and against institutional attempts to mandate how and what people should learn. So, like Hammond and Collins (1991) I believe that self-direction can be reinterpreted with a political edge so that it "fits squarely into the tradition of emancipatory adult education" (p. 13).

## **Political Dimensions to Self-Direction**

The case for self-direction as an inherently political concept rests on two arguments. First, that at the intellectual heart of self-direction is the issue of control, particularly control over what are conceived as acceptable and appropriate learning activities and processes. Second, that exercising self-direction requires that certain conditions be in place regarding access to resources, conditions that are essentially political in nature. Let me take each of these themes in turn.

### **Control as a Political Issue**

The one consistent element in the majority of definitions of self-direction is the importance of the learner's exercising control over all educational decisions. What should be the goals of a learning effort, what resources should be used, what methods will work best for the learner and by what criteria the success of any learning effort should be judged are all decisions that are said to rest in the learner's hands. This emphasis on control - on who decides what is right and good and how these things should be pursued - is also central to notions of emancipatory adult education.

When talking about his work at Highlander, Horton (1990) stressed that "decision making was at the center of our students' experiences" (p. 152), and he pointed out that "if you want to have the students control the whole process, as far as you can get them to control it, then you can never, at any point, take it out of their hands". Who controls the decisions concerning the ways and directions in which adults learn is a political issue highlighting the distribution of educational and political power. Who has the final say in framing the range and type of decisions that are to be taken, and in establishing the pace and mechanisms for decision making, indicates where control really resides.

Self-direction as an organizing concept for adult education therefore calls to mind some powerful political associations. It implies a democratic commitment to shifting to learners as much control as possible for conceptualizing, designing, conducting and evaluating their learning and for deciding how resources are to be used to further these processes. Candy (1991) notes that this commitment sometimes leads to forms of spurious democracy in which adult educators feel they have no right to stand for any agendas they feel are important. He writes that "there is nothing inherently undemocratic about knowing more than a novice" and that "inappropriate use of self-direction only belittles the educator and confuses the learner" (p. 71). Horton makes the same point: "There's no such thing as just being a coordinator or facilitator, as if you don't know anything. What the hell are you around for, if you don't know

anything. Just get out of the way and let somebody have the space that knows something, believes something" (Horton and Freire, 1990, p. 154). But honoring people's self-direction is not the same as abandoning one's convictions and purposes as an educator in a mistaken act of pedagogic abnegation. Thought of politically, self-direction can more accurately be seen as part of a populist democratic tradition which holds that people's definitions of what is important to them should frame and instruct governments' actions, and not the other way round. This is why the idea of self-direction is such anathema to advocates of a core or national curriculum, and why it is opposed so vehemently by those who see education as a process of induction into cultural literacy. As Gelpi (1979) points out, self-directed learning is institutionally and politically inconvenient to those who promote educational blueprints to control the learning of others "because it means individual control of the ends, contents, and methods of education" (p. 2). Emphasizing people's right to self-direction also invests a certain trust in their wisdom, in their capacity to make wise choices and take wise actions. To quote Horton (1990) again "you have to posit trust in the learner in spite of the fact that the people you're dealing with may not, on the surface, seem to merit that trust" (p. 131) ... "what we do involves trusting people and believing in their ability to think for themselves" (p. 157). Advocating that people should be in control of their own learning is based on the belief that if people had a chance to give voice to what most moves and hurts them, they would soon show that they were only too well aware of the real nature of their problems and of ways to deal with these.

If we place the self-conscious, self-aware exertion of control over learning at the heart of what it means to be self-directed, we raise a host of questions about how control can be exercised authentically in a culture which is itself highly controlling. For example, it is easy to imagine an inauthentic form of control where adults feel that they are framing and taking key decisions about their learning, all the while being unaware that this is happening within a framework which excludes as subversive, unpatriotic or immoral, certain ideas or activities. Controlled self-direction is, from a political perspective, a contradiction in terms, a self-negating concept as erroneous as the concept of limited empowerment. On the surface we may be said to be controlling our learning when we make decisions about pacing, resources and evaluative criteria. But if the range of acceptable content has been pre-ordained so that we deliberately or unwittingly steer clear of things that we sense are deviant or controversial, then we are controlled rather than in control. We are victims, in effect, of self-censorship, willing partners in hegemony. Hegemony describes the process whereby ideas, structures and actions come to be seen by people as both natural and axiomatic - as so obvious as to be beyond question or challenge - when in fact they are constructed and transmitted by powerful minority interests to protect the status quo that serves these interests so well. A fully developed self-directed learning project would have at its center an alertness to the possibility of hegemony. Those engaged in this fully realised form of self-directed learning would understand how easily external control can unwittingly be internalised in the form of an automatic self-censorship - an instinctive reaction that "I can't learn this because it's out of bounds" (that is, unpatriotic, deviant or subversive). A fully adult form of self-direction exists only when we examine our definitions of what we think it is important for us to learn for the extent to which these end up serving repressive interests.

Let me use a biographical example of the hegemonic aspect of self-direction that is chosen to be as concrete and as close to home as I can find for many readers of, and

contributors to, this journal. Untenured professors of adult education may well decide that the self-directed learning effort that is of greatest importance to them is learning how to play the academic game of scholarly publishing, since winning this game is crucial for their continued employment. In pursuit of this project they may diagnose their situation (the prospect of impending unemployment), generate learning goals (developing the expository and research skills needed to get into print in a selected number of journals), locate resources (such as manuals on "Tips for Tenure" or colleagues who publish a lot) and develop their own evaluative indicators that show how well they are progressing in their project (for example, an annual target of writing and gaining acceptance for four articles in refereed journals). To all intents and purposes this is a fully fledged self-directed learning effort in which control resides with the learner at every stage. Yet how much control can really be said to exist when the needs towards which so much effort is directed remain unproblematised, lacking the scrutiny of critical examination? In such a situation, self-directed learning projects can easily be adaptive rather than educationally confrontive, myopic rather than visionary. In their being sculpted for short term personal gain rather than long term structural change, such projects display an inauthentic, distorted form of control.

Acting in the way described above is acting with only the illusion of control since we make our choices while remaining trapped within a single, closed, interpretive framework. If we were aware of the opportunity to explore alternative options in our self-directed learning project - perhaps to study how colleagues on other campuses had worked to change the reward structure in their organizations so that teaching and service were granted credibility equal to that accruing from publishing - we might well decide to use our control differently. We might decide to work collectively at changing the political culture of our institution, rather than trying to learn its subtleties to ensure our individual success. Control, from this perspective, would be seen in our coming to understand the origins, functioning and contradictions of the system and in our working to change or replace it with one that honors our daily activities as educators. At the very least we would recognise that what we perceived as our private problem (devoting so much time and energy to teaching well that none was left for writing) was actually a public issue that illustrated the contradictions inherent in cultural definitions of scholarship, vocation and academic credibility. We would begin to think about the wider structural changes that should be in place for individual educators' lives to improve over the long term, and we would start to examine strategies and tactics for achieving these. In focusing our self-directed learning efforts on our own long term best interests we would realise that these lay in collective action.

Knowing of the structural contradictions of the system, and being aware of how the cards were stacked against us as conscientious adult educators rather than as scholarly researchers, does not mean, of course, that we would always decide to work for changes in the political culture of the organization and to its reward system. We may decide that we do not have the energy for this task, that the resources for seeing our action through are not in place, that such action has costs that are too high to pay, that the system is serving us well anyway, or, indeed, that the system is right. But even if we choose to stick with asking successful colleagues to mount short-term workshops on "Surviving the Tenure Process" we would be aware of the consequences (including the limits) of our decision and it would have been taken on the basis of full



information about a range of possible activities. In this regard, our control would be more authentic and mean much more than if it was exercised within the framework of an unchallenged system, and without the opportunity for us to speculate on imagined alternatives.

As we examine the issue of control in self-direction it is also important to recognise that the 'self' that is involved in conducting learning is culturally formed and bound. Who we are and how we decide what it is important for us to be able to know or do are questions that are questions of culture. The self in a self-directed learning project is not an autonomous, innocent self, contentedly floating free from cultural influences. It has not sprung fully formed out of a political vacuum. It is, rather, an embedded self, a self whose instincts, values, needs and beliefs have been shaped by the surrounding culture. As such, it is a self that reflects the constraints and contradictions, as well as the liberatory possibilities, of that culture. The most critically sophisticated and reflective adults cannot escape their own autobiographies. Only with a great deal of effort and a lot of assistance from others can we become aware of how what we think are our own wholly altruistic impulses, free from any bias of race, gender or class, actually end up reinforcing repressive structures. Hence, an important aspect of a fully adult self-directed learning project should be a reflective awareness of how one's desires and needs have been culturally formed and of how cultural factors can convince one to pursue learning projects that are against one's own best interests.

Candy (1989, 1991) is one of the few who has consistently argued for this kind of constructivist interpretation of self-directed learning. As he writes, "learning in its fullest context is a social activity, and the attainment of full personal autonomy - both in learning and outside it - must recognize this interdependence" (p. 22), a theme also echoed by Jarvis (1987) and Chene (1983). Candy warns us to remember that "adults are powerfully affected by aspects of their backgrounds - including family and prior education - in ways that limit and constrain their ability to be self-directing in certain learning situations" (p. 311). Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) also believe that self-directed learning activities "*cannot* be divorced from the social context in which they occur" (p. 32) because "the social context provides the arena in which the activity of self-direction is played out" (p. 33) and they call for more attention to the way in which global and cross-cultural factors frame this activity. As we begin discussing the cultural contingency of self-direction, Flannery (1993) warns us against an uncritical imposition and elevation of the idea across cultural differences: "without honest critique there can be no true consideration of the values inherent in the notion of self-direction, the relationship of these values to an American ethic, the possible discriminatory aspects of these values within North American society, or the place of other models of learning, such as the communal learning of persons and groups, including women, African-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, and others" (112).

I have argued that being in control of our learning means that we make informed choices. Making informed choices means, in turn, that we act reflectively in ways that further our interests. But, as Chene (1983) points out, informed choices can only be made on the basis of as full a knowledge as possible about the different options open to us and the consequences of each of these. Control that is exercised on the basis of limited information and unexamined alternatives is a distorted, mindless and illusory form of control. It may lead us to devote enormous amounts of energy to making

individual incremental adjustments to our daily existence without realising that these tinker with symptoms while leaving unaddressed the structural changes necessary if our efforts are to have anything other than fleeting significance. With regard to the importance of having full access to all relevant information and of being aware of how one's projects have been culturally framed, it is important to acknowledge that these are tentative ideals. We will never be in a position of total omniscience where we have constant access to every piece of relevant information about all the problems that face us, and where we possess such a pure and undistorted insight into our own motivations and impulses that it enables us to distinguish between real and artificial needs, and between constraining short term and empowering long term interests. However, it is just as important that we act as if these ideals could be realised. For control to mean anything it is crucial that we have access to significant information. What we define as significant information, however, may be regarded by someone else as privileged or confidential. Consequently, taking control of our learning is likely to bring us into direct conflict with powerful entrenched interests. This leads me to the second political condition for self-directed learning, that concerning the unconstrained access to resources necessary for the completion of learning projects.

### **Access to Resources**

How much control can really be said to exist when the dreams we dream have no hope of being realised because we are struggling simply to survive ? The full meaning of control in a self-directed learning project cannot be realised simply by wishing it into existence. Any number of supposedly self-directed initiatives have foundered because those attempting to assume control over their learning found themselves in the invidious position of being denied the resources to exercise that control properly. Being self-directed is a meaningless idea if you are too weary at the end of the day to think clearly about what form of learning would be of most use to you, or if you are closed off from access to the resources necessary for you to be able to realise your self-designed projects. Being the arbiter of our own decisions about learning requires that we have enough energy to make reflectively informed choices. Decisions about learning made under the pressure of external circumstances when we are tired, hungry and distracted, cannot be said to be fully self-directed. The process of making reflectively informed decisions is lengthy, tiring and often contentious. For learners to exercise control in any meaningful sense they must not be so buried under the demands of their daily work that they have neither the time, energy nor inclination left over to engage in shaping and making decisions about their own development. As Freire (1970) points out, action springing from an immediate and uninformed desire to do something, anything, to improve one's day to day circumstances can be much less effective than action springing from a careful analysis of the wider structural changes that must be in place for individual lives to improve over the long term. If the decisions we make for ourselves are borne out of a desperate immediate need that causes us to focus only on what is right in front of us rather than on the periphery or in the future, if we choose from among options that are irrelevant to the real nature of the problem at hand, or if our range of choices has been framed by someone else, then our control is illusory. In this regard, decision framing is as important as decision making in a self-directed learning project. Understood thus, we can see that central to a self-directed learning effort is a measure of unconstrained time and space necessary for us to make decisions that are carefully and critically examined and that are in our own best long term interests.

An inauthentic, limited form of self-direction is evident when our efforts to develop ourselves as learners remain at the level of philosophical preferences because the resources needed for action are unavailable or denied to us. Exercising control over learning is meaningless if control comprises only an intellectual analysis of one's problems and solutions. As learners we may believe we have a beautifully accurate reading of our condition, and we may secure all kinds of promises from those in power to do something about it when resources are more plentiful, but if this is the extent of our control then we are doing little more than playing an intellectual game. Hence, as well as the resources of adequate time and energy needed to make reflectively informed decisions, self-directed learning also implies that learners have access to the resources needed to act on these decisions. As a learner, I may come to a very clear analysis of the skills I need to develop in order to do learn something but be told repeatedly by those I approach for the necessary resources to do this that while my plans are good ones the budget cuts that have just been forced on my organization and community mean that priorities have changed and my plans are now rendered useless. If this is the case then, sooner or later, I am bound to realise that the problem of blocked access to resources is not one of individual personalities (the myopic, anal retentive, bureaucratic administrator constantly trying to give me the shaft) but one of structural constraints. I will come to see that learning something I want to learn is a project that is intimately connected to changing not only the political culture whereby the posting of yearly profits is extolled as the zenith of cultural and community achievement, but also the structures through which wealth, power and resources remain the preserve of an unrepresentative minority. Taking control over our development as learners and requesting resources to act on the development efforts we envisage will bring many of us to a realisation of the connections between personal learning efforts and changes in the wider political structures.

It may also be the case in a self-directed project that I decide that I want to learn something that I consider essential for my own development, only to be told that the knowledge or skills involved are undesirable, inappropriate or subversive. A desire to explore an alternative political ideology is meaningless if books exploring that ideology have been removed from the public library because of their 'unsuitability', or, perhaps more likely, if they have never been ordered in the first place. In a blaze of admirable masochism I may choose to undertake a self-directed learning project geared towards widening my understanding of how my practice as an educator is unwittingly repressive and culturally distorted. In doing this I may have to rely primarily on books because my colleagues are convinced of the self-evident correctness of their own unexamined practice. Yet I may well find that the materials I need for this project are so expensive that neither I, nor my local libraries, can afford to purchase them. In this regard it is ironic - an example of how ideas can concurrently be disseminated and marginalized - that critical analyses of adult education are often priced well beyond the pockets of many who could benefit from reading them. Again, I may need physical equipment for a self-directed effort I have planned and be told by those controlling such equipment that it is unavailable to me for reasons of cost or others' prior claims. If I decide to initiate a self-directed learning project that involves challenging the informational hegemony of a professional group, I may find that medical and legal experts place insurmountable barriers in my path in an effort to retain their position of authority. So being self-directed can be inherently politicising as learners come to a critical awareness of the differential distribution of resources necessary to conduct their self-directed learning efforts.

## **Conclusion: Distortions to Self-Directed Learning**

There is a certain irony in the fact that a concept seemingly so bound up with ideals of liberty and freedom as is self-direction can end up serving repressive interests. Yet this is precisely what happens when the images of self-direction in most people's minds are of self-contained, internally driven, capable adults working in splendid, though atomistic, isolation. As a representation of how learning occurs this idea is very much in harmony with the individualistic tenor of American culture. It underscores the folk lore of the self-made person that elevates to mythical status heroic tales of people succeeding against the odds by the sheer force of their own individual efforts. The video produced by the 1992 Clinton campaign - The Man From Hope - is a good example of this. That anyone can be President is a prized tenet of American culture. That this takes enormous amounts of money and, therefore, years of courting, and being co-opted by, big business interests, remains obscured. If the cultural formation of the self is ignored, it is all too easy to equate self-direction with separateness and even selfishness, with the narcissistic pursuit of private ends without regard to the consequences of this pursuit for others. Self-direction that honors only the efforts of the individual self is the educational equivalent of an Ivan Boesky like belief that one's needs and desires exist sui generis and have an inalienable right to be satisfied. In adult education programs which purport to embody the spirit of self-direction it is not unusual for learners to argue that they must have whatever they say they want - and that adult educators' efforts must be focused on providing these wants - or the spirit of self-direction is somehow being compromised.

A view of learning which regards human beings as self-contained, volitional beings scurrying around in individual projects, is one that works against cooperative and collective impulses. Citing self-direction, people can deny the importance of collective action, common interests and their basic human interdependence in favor of an obsessive focus on the self. This view of self-direction encourages a dissatisfying emphasis on a self that is sustained by its own internal emotional resources and that needs no external supports or momentum. It erects as the ideal of psychological development the independent, fully functioning person. Fortunately, this view of adult development as a movement toward the separate and autonomous self has been challenged in recent years by work on issues of gender (Belenky et. al., 1986) and on critical approaches to psychological development (Broughton, 1987; Sullivan, 1990). This work questions the patriarchal notion of atomistic self-determination as an educational ideal and as the natural end point of a person's psychological development. In its place it advances a feminist valuing of interdependence and a socially constructed interpretation of the self as equally viable educational ideals and as legitimate foci for conceptualizing psychological development. Building on these foci has been a body of work on feminist pedagogy (Lather, 1991; Luke and Gore, 1992) that emphasises interdependence, connectedness and the politics of nurturance (Culley and Portuges, 1985; Gabriel and Smithson, 1990).

Politically, the prevailing interpretation of self-direction which emphasizes atomistic isolation makes an engagement in common cause much harder for people to contemplate. It severs the necessary connection between private troubles and public issues (Mills, 1953) and makes it harder for learners to realise that apparently private learning projects are culturally framed. Ironically, as Boshier (1983) has pointed out, policy makers can also use the concept of self-direction to reduce public spending on

adult education. After all, they can argue, if adult educators tell us that adults are naturally self-directed learners (in contrast to authority-dependent children) then why bother making provision for their education ? Won't they self-directedly take their own initiatives in learning anyway ? But atomistic, divisive interpretations of self-directed learning need not be end of the story concerning the contributions of this concept to adult education theory and practice. If we can demonstrate convincingly the political dimensions to an idea that is now enshrined in so many programmatic mission statements and in the espoused theory of the field as a whole, and if we can prise the concept out of the slough of narcissistic, unproblematic self-actualization in which it is currently mired, then we have a real chance to use this idea as one important element in rebuilding a critical practice of adult education. Self-directed learning could become one of the most politically charged Trojan Horses the field of adult education has ever known.

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