# The Role of Positionality in Teaching for Critical Consciousness: Implications for Adult Education

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**Abstract:** *This paper examines how differences in positionality of the three co-authors (as a white man, a white woman, and an African-American woman) informs both the theorizing and the differences in practice of education for critical consciousness in adult higher education settings.*

## Introduction

The role of adult and higher education in teaching for critical consciousness and social change and in responding to the educational needs of a multicultural society has been discussed in many adult education circles. These discourses are influenced by a variety of theoretical orientations with social transformation and emancipation as its goal, including critical theory and pedagogy (Brookfield, 1995; Shor, 1996; Welton, 1995), transformational learning (Mezirow, 1995), feminist theory and pedagogy (Hart, 1992; hooks, 1994; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1996; Tisdell, 1998), Africentric and critical multicultural perspectives on education (Banks, 1993; Hayes & Colin, 1994; Sleeter & McLaren, 1995, Sheared, 1994). Each of these paradigms has a different emphasis and primary unit of analysis; yet, they all are concerned with the role of education in working for critical consciousness and social change. Many emancipatory adult educators are informed by all of these paradigms, and are thus theoretically grounded in similar places. Yet, as adult educators, we do represent different social locations and positionality (race, gender, class, sexual orientation, ableness), and thus tend to implement these theoretical frames *in practice* in quite different ways. We believe that these differences in practice are based in part by our differences in positionality. This issue of how the positionality of the instructor shapes teaching and learning for critical consciousness is one of the important questions for the 21st century that has not been adequately explored. Therefore the purpose of this paper is two-fold: (a) to explore the similarities and differences in the theoretical orientation of critical pedagogy, feminist pedagogy, transformative learning, and critical multiculturalism: and (b) to discuss how positionality impacts *the practice* of emancipatory adult education, based partly on our own experience as three co-authors of different social locations and that of other adult educators.

## The Literature that Informs the Paper

When exploring the theoretical literature of teaching for critical consciousness in adult education the lens of practice brings to light the differences and similarities among the various discourses. *Critical pedagogy* tends to give greater attention to privilege and oppression where the primary unit of analysis is class. From this perspective, the teacher is seen more as a liberator and less as a facilitator with the goal of helping the oppressed recognize the sociopolitical and economic contradictions of the world and how to take action against (primarily) class-based oppression. The critical pedagogue openly advocates for social justice through the use of problem posing and dialogical means in a collective and horizontal relationship with students as subjects not objects. Practice is rooted in rationality and students are encouraged to look beyond the personal to the political (Freire, 1970; Shor, 1996, Welton, 1995). No attention is given to the positionality of the instructor or how it shapes learning. Similar to critical pedagogy is *transformative*

*learning*, where both share rational, non-affective, and subject-centered approaches to emancipation. However, they part company at the juncture of collective and individual transformation. Mezirow (1995) finds collective transformation dependent on personal transformation, where the instructor is seen more as a facilitator contextualizing the teaching to the learner's experience and promoting social change through individual self-understanding and personal fulfillment. The primary unit of analysis here is the individual, where difference is viewed in terms of personality not the student's social location, and no attention is given to the instructor's positionality, with little analysis of how systems of power and privilege shape learning. *Feminist pedagogy* in general shifts the focus of teaching for critical consciousness from an emphasis on rationality, to one that emphasizes learning through relationships and affective ways of knowing, where an emphasis has been on gender. There are different versions of feminist pedagogy, and it is only the structural and poststructural models that deal with systems of power and privilege based on the intersections of gender with race, class, sexual orientation (Tisdell, 1998). In these models the instructor focuses on challenging power relations based on an examination of how participants construct knowledge through the affective and rational domains. The unit of analysis is the *connections between* the individual and the social structure or the systems of power and privilege (their race, class, gender) that shape how individuals view the world. Finally, the discourses of *critical multiculturalism*, also inform the emancipatory adult education discourses. Grounded initially in the Civil Rights Movement of the '60s with an emphasis on how to teach to alter power relations based on race, the primary unit of analysis in critical multiculturalism is race (Banks, 1997; hooks, 1994; Sleeter, 1996) But these discourses are also informed by the discourses of power and privilege in critical theory and pedagogy. The issue of positionality (particularly based on race) of both instructors and students are dealt with here and the instructor's purpose is to examine how race (and other) power relations shape teaching and learning. A confluence of these bodies of literature can offer some direction to how emancipatory adult educators might implement practice. But a more thorough look at how

positionality of instructors and students is related to the classroom processes is necessary.

## How the Paper was Constructed

The co-authors, Mary Stone Hanley (an African-American woman), Libby Tisdell (a white woman), and Ed Taylor (a white man) dialogued about their similarities and differences in the ways they approach educating for critical consciousness in light of their positionality and where they situate themselves relative to the intersecting paradigms discussed in the previous paragraph. Through a taped dialogue, we discovered in a very tangible way, how positionality influences our ways of knowing and doing. We found that despite our similar theoretical grounding, our positionality also shaped the way we interacted and HOW we even talked about these issues. Three significant themes emerged from over 10 hours of taped discussion, that of a) positionality in our theorizing and practice; b) constructing knowledge between emotions and rationality; and c) deconstructing teacher authority and teacher relations. Each theme is explored via portions of the actual dialogue because it preserves the individual voices and makes the differences evident. It was also the dialectic manner of the dialogue process that led to a new understanding about the role of positionality in teaching for critical consciousness.

*Positionality in Our Theorizing and Practice*
**Libby**: I'm convinced, based both on research and my own experience, that the positionality (gender, race, class) of both instructors and learners shape how classroom dynamics unfold and how knowledge is constructed in a learning environment. Unfortunately as a topic of study until very recently it has been ignored in the literature. I have become aware of how it shapes teaching and learning and interacts with affect from teaching classes that focus on diversity issues. The content of such classes is controversial and people typically have strong emotions and much passion. It is neither possible nor desirable to deal with these issues *only* on a rational level. In terms of my own teaching, the fact that I am a white woman from a middle class background, socialized to value relationships, affects my teaching and how students relate to me, and the various posi-

tionalities of the students affect the way they relate to each other. I use lots of stories, and examples from my own and others' life experience when trying to clarify a point in theory we are working with. As a result, students probably know more about me, and expect me to be somewhat more relational and nurturing than they would of most white males. In trying to make positionality visible, I include in my curriculum the works of lots of people of color, and highlight and value cultural differences in the way we speak, tell a story, sing, interact, learn. Of course, I do this as a white woman. What is important in educating myself (as well as others) for critical consciousness is that *I know* that I do this as a *white woman*. This way I can guard against assuming that others should interact and behave as I do, using "whiteness" as the standard.

**Mary:** As an educator, critical multiculturalism is most reflective of my current world outlook based on experience as a marginalized working woman and as an African American confronted by the dominant U.S. culture. Critical multiculturalism as discussed by Banks (1997), Sleeter (1996), and Gay (1995) brings the discourse on race, social class, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation to the center of the story of who we are as a country, and contests the half truths, lies, and mythology that has been put forth as history and contemporary social relationships. The decentering of power in multiculturalism and the social justice promise of critical theory, to me provide a framework for social change, and a grounding place for my own work. My positionality as an African American woman has a lot to do with people's expectations and how we inter-relate in my classroom. I'm teaching a predominantly European-American group. I don't want to shut them down. When confronted by racism, which is possible, even probable, I'm afraid that I will silence them if I lose my temper. I always start off the Multicultural Education and Diversity and Equity class by saying that European Americans have to deal with their guilt, and people of color have to deal with their rage. I try to get all of my students to understand that my ultimate students are the students that these people will teach, for I am an adult educator working with adults who are,

or will be, teaching children. Teachers need to know that they are cultural workers.

**Ed:** There are two philosophical paradigms that inform my thinking: that of the critical humanist (a critical humanist rooted in rationality and personal autonomy based on the work of Mezirow, 1995, and Brookfield, 1995) and the emancipatory feminist paradigm more in line with the philosophy of bell hooks (1994), which more directly deals with positionality. First, I believe, along with Freire and hooks, that no education is politically neutral. My teaching methods, course curriculum, and ways I learn with my students reflect a particular political perspective of whose voices are included and what is considered knowledge. In most of my classes, I talk about my agenda as well as have students explore their own in relationship to the topic under study. A second belief I hold is the importance of recognizing one's positionality and how multiple identities, student and teacher's alike, shape their educational experience. A third belief, without which the others could not be understood, is the essentiality of critical-reflection. Given these beliefs, on practical level, I approach the idea of positionality by attempting to create an educational environment that allows difference to flourish. This means taking an active role at addressing the power disparities that exist between and among students and faculty by establishing ground rules early on, including often marginalized voices about the topic under discussion through readings, outside speakers, and setting conditions and a tone necessary for all voices to be included in critical discourse.

*Constructing Knowledge: Between Emotions and Rationality*

**Ed:** I would say that in most adult education teaching paradigms, particularly that of transformative learning as discussed by Mezirow and others, promoting rationality is seen as the basis for fostering critical consciousness. However, research clearly shows that this is a pretty limited perspective of the process of change (Taylor, 1997). Even though rational discourse and reflection are fundamental, emotions, other ways of knowing, and unconscious learning are of equal importance.

**Mary:** I definitely think the balance on the scale of rationality and emotion is culturally constructed. I find Anglocentric culture very rational and somewhat emotionally repressed. And I find that there is so much learning that goes on physically. The physical self is a major source of information and if we only use one source, the mind, we'd limiting our learning. When you put something into physical motion you experience it in a different way, and it becomes internalized in a different way.

**Libby:** I totally agree when you say that how we deal with emotions and rationality is cultural. As an Irish-Catholic girl/woman, I was socialized to attend to other people's emotional needs. At the same time, I was also socialized to avoid conflict (anger is "bad"), and other "negative emotions" (the overt expression of want, need, or desire is "selfish"), and to "rationally" deal with (and not express) such negative emotions. Further, the body was seen as something to be suspicious of – certainly not as a source of knowledge.

**Mary:** The academy has always been about the Eurocentric aspects of the dominant society. To not introduce other ways of knowing and other ways of thinking is to do a disservice to people whom we are trying to educate, because they will have to deal with other people from other cultures. This old reality is based on White supremacy; it's based on a certain class position.... If we're going to claim to be intellectuals, and boast that the academy is intellectually challenging, then we're going to have to address the true complexity of our culture – now *that's* an academic challenge!

**Ed:** Like previous research, on an intellectual level I recognize the significance of feelings and their interrelationship with rationality, but on a practical level I often find myself at an impasse of how to deal with intense feelings in the classroom. Feelings most often seem to manifest themselves in relationship to personal self-disclosure about a particular event or experience. Furthermore, too much focus on the personal starts to turn the classroom experience from one of education into therapy.... In response to this challenge of having to engage emotions to effectively promote rationality I draw on the guidance of hooks (1994) shaping my practice. To begin, I work at getting my students to recognize that the

personal is always a partial view of an experience, never complete, indicative of a particular perspective, and needs to be recognized for its partiality. And second, that the personal voice of experience should be interpreted only within the boundaries of that experience, such that one personal experience does not imply understanding or knowledge of related experiences. Third, the personal is only a beginning point, not an ending, instead it must be problematized and connected to the broader social, political, and historical context of which originates.

**Libby:** I totally agree. If we just go by "my experience" or this person's experience, who more or less become a spokesperson for an entire cultural group, then we've done a disservice. Experience is always partial. But I think our job, is helping ourselves and our students understand other people's experience, in some ways beyond just what is written and spoken. We can do this partially through readings, through exploring theory. This part is easy for me. But, we can also do it by providing experiential opportunities in the classroom. And for critical consciousness, I think you have to DO things differently too, beyond just talk about it. This is what is harder for me – trying to figure out what to DO differently.

*Deconstructing Teacher Authority: Teacher Student Relations*

**Ed:** Speaking of dealing with power relations, one of the things we always need to be mindful of in the higher education classroom, is issues about dealing with our role as an authority, as the "representative of the university." I'm always trying to figure out how to deal with this, because critical and feminist pedagogy approaches to teaching and learning, decenter the notion of "teacher authority" and attempt to have students become authorities of their own knowledge.

**Libby:** How to deal with authority issues is quite central to the feminist and critical pedagogy literature. As a feminist who does value relationships, I try to model a relational or collaborative authority style. But for me, some things that are not negotiable. I would agree with Freire that I see myself as an educator and NOT a facilitator (Freire & Macedo, 1995), so participants will read about some

unnegotiated aspects of the curriculum that I choose relative to the course content. And they will have to do some writing – that's part of what higher education is about, and I guess is a part of "academic rigor." But there are lots of aspects that are negotiable, both of the course content, and the classroom process, so these aspects are negotiated at the beginning, and in so doing groups claim some of their own power to determine how the class will be conducted.

**Mary:** I always cringe a bit when I hear the term "academic rigor." It's usually said as if there is some codified standard written in stone somewhere. Some of the most racist, sexist, classist research and material is written with "academic rigor". I expect my students to write coherently and to synthesize and evaluate the literature and classroom discussions with their thinking and experience. I expect them to test theory and practice through praxis. In the Diversity and Equity class, I start off with a lesson in dialectical materialism. A tenant of dialectics is that you only know something in its movement. You never truly know anything in its stasis; really knowing something is understanding where it came from, as well as where it is now, its internal structure, and its external context. We study White supremacy in this context. Then I have them write autobiographies. They have to write about themselves, but they also have to do research and apply that research to their autobiography, reflecting on how the research material affects their understanding of their development and their teaching. I have them go back from their earliest memories because it's difficult to know where you are until you look at how you got there. It's been an interesting phenomena to me that so many European Americans don't consider themselves to have culture. I find that absolutely fascinating. It's like a fish being in water. They're been in the water for so long that they don't recognize it as being anything.

### Conclusion

As we reflected on our initial dialogue we were struck with a number of insights. First, in spite of our very similar theoretical grounding, both our teaching practices and the way we talk about them are quite different; we believe this is a direct result of our differences in positionality by race, gender, and class, in combination with personality differences. For example, it seems that while Ed is very much interested in teaching for social change, he still emphasizes rationality as a way to get there in a higher education classroom. While he recognizes experience as important, he emphasizes critically (and rationally) reflecting both on those experiences and how positionality shapes them. This is perhaps the most typical (of the three of us) of what has been done in adult higher education in the past ten years. We believe that this privileging of the rational and relative discomfort with too much emphasis on the affective or experiential apart from rationality is informed in large part by his positionality as a white male, along with his personality. Mary, on the other hand, wants the students to actually have a different experience in the classroom itself; she doesn't just want students to critically reflect on past experiences. The emphasis on constructing knowledge through engaging in a different experience, such as exploring an idea or way of being, and physically "putting it in motion" in the classroom is primary for her. Critical reflection is also important, to examine how the comfort/discomfort level relates to one's culture of origin, and how new ways of knowing/experiencing can create new forms of cultural knowledge as we work for social change; yet it is not more important that the experience itself. We believe that Mary's greater comfort level with having the experience and "doing things differently" in the classroom, is due in part to race differences as well as Mary's personality and life experience as a theater artist. Mary's experience within the African American community, has made her more comfortable with greater modulation in voice, physical movement, and gesture as part of day to day communication patterns, which affects her comfort level in this regard. Of course, quite apart from her cultural background, Mary's experience as a theater artist also increases her comfort level with doing these types of activities. Libby is situated somewhere between Mary and Ed – incorporating more space for affect and emotion than Ed, still with quite an emphasis on rationality, but struggling to incorporate "doing things differently" as part of education for critical consciousness. Her comfort with rationality is reflective of her Irish-Catholic cultural back-

ground of "existing from the neck up," but as a woman in particular, she is quite comfortable with "positive emotions" that promote relational knowing. Yet. she struggles with anger, or too much passionate exchange, although believes this is an important aspect of educating for critical consciousness. We believe this is fairly typical of white women.

The fact that we are very close friends affected the way in which we could engage in this dialogue. We could tease each other about being uncomfortable with emotions or affect, or conflict, or emphasizing power relations, or physical or experiential activities in the classroom. We could argue about, and examine whether something was a "personality quirk" or indicated a gender, cultural, or class tendency. Yet we believe that our positionality and that of each of our students affects how students relate with the course content and each other in the classroom. In spite of some of our differences, it is important to recognize our common theoretical grounding, and the fact that we all value and require our students to integrate insights from both theory and practice. We also recognize the importance of engaging students holistically – affectively, somatically, and rationally, although practically speaking, because of our positionality, each of us is more comfortable with some of those ways of interrelating than others. We also differ in our comfort level with degrees of self disclosure in our teaching and writing, which is also partly shaped by our positionality along with our personality differences. Finally, we recognize the strengths and limitations of our own power as a teacher and the role it plays in teacher-student relationship. While we have only scratched the surface in discussing how positionality shapes learning, our hope is that by beginning this discussion other adult educators will continue it with us along with their colleagues and students.

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