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Getting to Know You: The Prospect of Challenging Ableism Through Adult Learning

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Ableism is discrimination on the grounds that being able bodied is the normal and superior human condition. In contrast, being “disabled” is linked to ill health, incapacity, and dependence. These understandings become institutionalized in the beliefs, language, and practices of nondisabled people and create barriers to equitable social participation for many disabled people. Able-bodied people are often unaware of the constraining impact of disability. For that reason, they are likely to assume that the circumstances of their able-bodied world are universal (Komesaroff and McLean, 2006). Adult education is one context where ableist notions may persist unrecognized and unchallenged as these understandings have become institutionalized in the beliefs, language, and practices of nondisabled people. The fact that most teachers and learners currently are able-bodied individuals may also complicate and obscure ableist prejudice.

The purpose of this chapter is to suggest the potential of contact and relationship of able-bodied people with disabled people to lead adult learners to begin to identify, confront, and change ableist views of disability. Further, the aim of the chapter is to consider the implications of contact for initial and ongoing professional development. When a hegemonic understanding, such as the superiority of the able-bodied condition, is intimately connected to a professional role, the risks involved in challenging such an understanding include the possibility of changing a valued professional identity. This is because when able-bodied persons get to know disabled people, the basis of their previously unquestioned notions of ability and disability

and normality and abnormality may be challenged. In some circumstances, however, the disparity between old and new understandings may be insufficient to promote change and instead serve to reaffirm currently held ableist notions. In choosing to avoid the discomfort such change brings, professionals may remain in the state of not knowing “what they do does” for the recipients of their services (Foucault, 1980, cited in Ware, 2002, p. 145).

Nature and Role of Knowledge and Beliefs

Knowledge and belief are distinct yet intricately related components of an understanding of the way things are. Knowledge is “a complex operation of the examination of differences” limited by time and memory (Luhman, 1990, cited in Ahlemeyer, 2000, p. 3). Beliefs are understandings about the world based on evaluation and judgments thought to be true. They can be naive commonsense assumptions with little evidence of a theoretical knowledge base. Beliefs can also be informed and reflect an understanding of relevant concepts (Brownlee, Dart, Boulton-Lewis, and McCrindle, 1998).

Distinguishing knowledge from belief is difficult; beliefs are distinct from knowledge, although they underlie it. Belief systems are disputable, more inflexible, and less dynamic than knowledge systems, which are open to evaluation and critical examination. Beliefs filter new knowledge, discarding what conflicts and incorporating knowledge compatible with existing beliefs (Pajares, 1992). Belief change has a strong affective and emotional underpinning, as it involves cognitive conflict arising from mismatches between ideas and practices or dissatisfaction with existing notions (Ho, 2000). Challenges must produce sufficient discomfort to motivate a process of accommodation and change or rejection of beliefs that no longer fit with existing understandings. When no conflict is experienced, existing beliefs may be added to but not reconstructed.

The contemporary focus on knowledge as a social construction that produces and organizes differences invites learners to develop and change their ideas through the dissonant and disruptive effects of cognitive change. This position is supported by several versions of dissonance theory that maintain that the impetus for the construction of new knowledge stems from experience that provokes uncertainty (Festinger, 1957). This uncertainty has been variously described in the literature as an uncomfortable state (Tatum, 1992); disorientation and anxiety (Helms, 1995); disorientation (Mezirow, 1997); and the recognition of a discrepancy, conflict, or anomaly requiring resolution (Tillema, 1998). The conflict experienced between the realities of experience and existing preconceptions prompts change or resistance. Both the motivational needs of the perceiver, such as reaffirmation, and his or her attitudes toward members of a category identified as not normal have been found to hasten the process of stereotypic judgment and categorization (Hugenberg and Sacco, 2008). The next section considers the implications of this process and conceptual change.

Categorization and Conceptual Change

Categorization is the fundamental element of social cognition that shapes the way people perceive others. Categorical thinking is the process of assigning individuals to broad social categories according to their apparent similarities and differences. It also alerts the observer to any information that does not align with reasonable expectations of persons associated with a category (Macrae and Bodenhausen, 2000). Martha Minow (1990) highlights the dilemma of difference; whether it is attended to or ignored, social stigma results. She identifies the stereotyping and categorization of individuals as a process that cedes power to social definitions. In this way, notions of difference are embedded in categories as if they were inevitable and natural. As categorical notions are socially constructed, they may be challenged and changed through adult learning that promotes the examination of the assumptions embedded in social definitions and categories.

Currently, the indirect evidence of the mental models, concepts, and theories that people exhibit in actions and attitudes is the focus of research and study. Science education has been used as a medium to demonstrate what goes on in a learner's mind (Vosniadou, 2007). There is evidence that when new information conflicts with prior knowledge, learning processes promote a reorganization of the content of categories. This reorganization can change prior misconceptions and correct category mistakes (Chi, 2008; Minow, 1990). However, reorganization does not occur when prior ideas and practices are difficult to discard when the beliefs are deeply held. Instead, learners may select confirming evidence to resolve and dismiss cognitive conflict rather than engage in restructuring categories (Hashweh, 2003).

New approaches acknowledge that reconstruction of categories is accomplished in several ways. The first is a conceptual change approach that begins with existing perceptions and beliefs. Michelene Chi (2008) maintains that an ontological shift is required as, in her view, conceptual change involves the revision and restructure of the entire network of beliefs connecting concepts. A second approach considers commonsense notions that learners draw on to classify and guide their professional practice. These are more likely to be reformulated when explicitly challenged or invalidated either through direct experience or the processes of adult learning (Carbaroglu and Roberts, 2000). Hashweh (2003) investigated the way teachers use such cognitive reorganization to accommodate changes in knowledge, beliefs, and practice, including the role of dissonance in mediating inconsistencies and confusions. He noted the propensity of teachers to avoid conflict and search only for confirming evidence as a factor that hinders conceptual change.

Ableist Categorization and the Challenge for Adult Learners

Ableism is a relatively recent term. It implies “deeply held negative attitudes toward disability” (Hehir, 2005, p. 10) and shapes categories of “otherness”

to which people are assigned on the basis of perceived difference. Central to ableism is the concept of norm or average because it simultaneously creates the idea of difference as abnormal deviance. These factors increase the likelihood that differences will be noticed and labeled in a more categorical way than may be the case when people are more critically aware of the controlling effect of hegemonic ideas of dis/ability. These ableist assumptions often play out in unconscious and unexamined ways on individual, institutional, and cultural levels. If adult educators really believe that disabled people should have ordinary lives, it is imperative that ways are found in training institutions such as higher and continuing education to draw attention to ableism and its effect on disabled people.

The literature of majority group identity development illustrates processes that can generate a greater consciousness of the injustice embedded in social systems and of individual attitudes and actions that maintain this situation. Models of the development of consciousness of white racial identity (Hardiman and Jackson, 1992; Helms 1995; Spanierman and Soble, 2010), heterosexual identity (Eliason, 1995), and the influence of ableism (McLean, 2005) all highlight the role of dissonance-inducing experiences in creating conditions that can promote conceptual change. Contact with people categorized as “other” produces difficult emotional reactions that are in conflict with acceptance of or apathy to their lived experience. Contact creates opportunities to challenge naiveté and initiate the development of an awareness of the impact of their own privileged status.

Role of Contact and Relationship

Without personal contact, nondisabled people remain unaffected by the presence of disability in the community. From the ableist position, the disabled state is “just there” (Linton, 1998). Institutions such as families, social networks, schools, and organizations facilitate contact. Social interaction is more likely to occur when disabled people live in the community and are encountered with high frequency as a consequence of friendship or employment. Other important factors include having time for contact, having an interest in disability, and not being afraid of people who are different.

Exposure to the experience of disablement starts with the opportunity to get to know a person with a disability through the development of relationships. Family relationships and friendships made through community and employment networks are common ways people become acquainted with the existence and impact of disability. Close family relationships, including a network of extended family members and the geographical proximity of families over a number of years, are factors that strengthen understandings of disability arising from kinship.

Friendship denotes the development and maintenance of close relationships through the exercise of social support, including the ability to ask

friends to respond to or engage in an activity. Friendship also embraces the development of mutually interdependent relationships with disabled people. Such friendships may begin in childhood and include those formed at school with disabled classmates. Becoming aware of the experiences of families with children with physical or intellectual impairments can lead to a more sympathetic understanding of their difficulties. In these circumstances, friendship often involves a reciprocal process of social support, such as child-minding for short periods.

Some exposure to understandings that are in contention with ableist certainties and beliefs is also likely to occur in the course of a career that involves working with disabled adults and children. Getting to know someone with a disability can precipitate a move from indifference and ignorance to a better appreciation of the effects of disability. For contact to be a catalyst for the internal process of struggle, able-bodied people need to be capable of being affected by others' experience of disability. The quality of openness or sensitivity to the feelings and experience of others involves the recognition of features of mutuality and flexibility. This sensitivity promotes reflection and enables a changed response, including a reflective examination of the ways ableist actions might contribute to ongoing forms of oppression of disabled people.

Identities, including professional identities, derive from the relationships that are formed by contact with others (Fay, 1996). Professional relationships are often one-sided. While professionals may be quick to recognize disability or difference in others, it is more difficult for them to turn the gaze inward and recognize features of ableism within themselves or in a collective professional identity. Without contact with the experience of disability, the understandings and assumptions people may have about themselves and what they consider to be normal are likely to remain undisturbed. The process of coming to understand others leads to changes in both self-understanding and awareness of the effects of social interaction.

Challenging and Confronting Thinking

The movement from unconsciousness to consciousness, while internal to the individual, is provoked by the social context. Induced by the conflict of cognitive dissonance, this emotionally uncomfortable experience is referred to as "disintegration" for members of powerful groups and "dissonance" for members of marginalized groups (Festinger, 1957; Sleeter, 2001). The process of disintegration is characterized by internal struggles that arise from the need to find a resolution to incongruities and contradictions in beliefs and assumptions. Challenges to ableist naiveté about the real situation for disabled people can cause feelings of discomfort, including guilt, shame, and sometimes anger at the recognition of one's own advantage. Initially contact and social interaction are likely to cause some surprise that the

societal stereotypes of people in marginalized groups do not match with the new experiences (Helms, 1990). One example is the realization that categorization as disabled is something nondisabled people do to others.

Another example is challenges to the established concept of normalcy, including its dubious use as an identifier of difference (Davis, 1997). Homogenizing forces that promote the acceptance of the prevailing norms lessen tolerance of difference. Normalcy is embedded in the beliefs, actions, and discourses that make up the fabric of everyday life. For the nondisabled person imbued with the tenets of normalcy, disability is a relative state characterized by a hierarchy of degrees of corporal misfortune. The effect of these notions is to privilege persons regarded as “able” while silencing and dominating those regarded as disabled.

Intense emotional experiences, such as those resulting from a sudden awareness of the effect of personal involvement in discriminatory social practice, provoke the disintegration of old meaning structures and the establishment of new ones. The affective dimension of learning also provides the substance for reflection that promotes the transformation of perspectives (Taylor, 2000). Sensitivity to the experience of others can facilitate an examination of unquestioned assumptions, in particular those related to the ableist view that disability is an inferior state based in biological impairment.

Practices in adult education assumed to be neutral and benevolent are also fields for challenge and critique. One effective practice is the employment of adult educators whose “private” identities as disabled or as parents of disabled children personify the challenges to ableist stereotypes. On one hand, such appointments assail ableist assumptions about competence as a marker of “normalcy.” On the other, a sympathetic awareness can be fostered when students learn about the effects of ableist community views and begin to contrast the conditions in their own lives and with those prevailing for disabled people and their families.

Effect of Contact on Ableist Understandings of Disability

The development of a relationship with a disabled person can trigger a jolting or enlightening experience that impels movement away from hegemonic understandings. Such an experience can prompt the recognition of previously held ableist views. Significant personal distress, jarring events, crises, or disorienting dilemmas and integrating circumstances can trigger perspective transformation. Frank Rusch (2003, p. 63) writes of his eye-opening realization that “we and they are the same people.” This was provoked when he began to understand the experience of behavior change procedures from the perspective of those subjected to them. Similar jolting realizations have been reported when adult learners become aware of the effects of ableism (McLean, 2008). The recognition of disability as a feature of ordinary human

existence changes and challenges earlier conceptualizations of disability as personal tragedy and loss.

Personally experiencing the impact of social practices that marginalize others is another jolting experience. Getting out and about with people who use wheelchairs raises consciousness of the marginalizing effect of constructed environments. The acknowledgment of individual responsibility for the ableist response promotes an impetus for personal change. It is likely that both disabled and nondisabled persons will view the challenge of change with some wariness. As in the abandonment of racism, painful or insightful encounters can trigger the process of disestablishment (Helms, 1990). Participation makes possible the relationships with others that shape identity. The unearned advantages of being “able” are evoked in the context of adult education through the combination of study and its practical application. Since people had been struck by these insights, they were no longer able to remain oblivious to the effects of ableism on disabled people.

Changing beliefs is not possible without a challenge, as those beliefs form “an unknown protective wall against new information” (Tillema, 1998, p. 226). At any point on the journey toward developing a consciousness of ableism, the individual faces a choice either to remain oblivious to the situation or to move toward greater consciousness. The recognition of the personally advantageous position of not being disabled can increase consciousness of the ways in which ableism is maintained. At the same time, recognizing one’s own advantage is an uncomfortable experience. To move from a position of indifference to one of concern about the social impact of disability requires sufficient flexibility to challenge, resist, or reconstruct established knowledge. Interaction with disabled people fosters empathy or openness to their experience.

Implications for Professional Development

If tertiary education is to implement the robust role assigned to it as a mediator in the current global context of economic, social, and cultural change (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2003), then exposing the structures of inequality in society, including the ableist views perpetuated in learning and teaching about disability, is a legitimate task. A central research concern for adult educators remains this: how to overcome the influences of social power that limit the boundaries of understanding, especially in relation to the social effects of classifying perceived differences between groups of people (Gorman, 2000, cited in Clark, 2006). Our task is to support students through the discomfiting discovery of structures of privilege and disadvantage inherent in institutionalized social positions. Maintaining a real commitment to social justice in adult education may involve the development of programs that purposefully foster relationships among diverse groups of people to increase the possibility of changing harmful preconceptions.

Service-learning is one model developed to integrate the objective of inclusive schooling into initial teacher education through a short period of experience in a range of voluntary support organizations in local communities (Carrington and Sagers, 2008). This model creates opportunities for relationships that promote the development of respect and empathy for people frequently regarded as different. The program employs reflection to assist students to examine their experience and develop a “more informed perspective about issues of marginalisation, segregation and injustice” (p. 803). Programs of study that occur alongside workplace experience therefore offer the opportunity for learners to become aware of their beliefs and their effects in practice.

Adult education can be an agent to change socially constructed views of disability. Opportunities to introduce nondisabled people to disabled people create the possibility they may get to know one another well. Where this occurs and there is provision to reflect on and challenge the conflicting ideas that arise from both interaction and a growing awareness of socially constructed conditions, there is the possibility of changing ableist beliefs. As John Ohliger observed: “When we impose ideas on people we train them. When we create an atmosphere in which people are free to explore ideas in dialogue and through interactions with other people, we educate them” (Ohliger, 1970, p. 250, cited in Wagner, 2009, p. 323).

With such principled direction, education may have a more sustained and transformative effect on understandings of normalcy, ability, and humanity that are required to protect the life chances of those most likely to be disregarded by the forces of late and globalized capitalism that shape contemporary social policy and practice.

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