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# Social Justice and Dispositions for Adult Education

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## Abstract

The article identifies dispositions from a thematic investigation of the pedagogical practice of Ernesto Che Guevara and various social movements in the United States. The article outlines and places these dispositions within the context of debates over social justice and dispositions for education program accreditation in the United States that often directly impact adult education graduate programs. These dispositions are then demonstrated in historical and contemporary adult education practice. The article argues that these dispositions have increasing relevance given the growing polarization of wealth and poverty and environmental destruction facing humanity.

## Keywords

disposition, social justice, radical adult education, Ernesto Che Guevara

As is known in educational circles, particularly in teacher preparation programs, the idea of identifying appropriate dispositions for educators is gaining increasing importance; it is a requirement for programs seeking accreditation from the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). Each institution seeking accreditation must develop dispositions that become a part of the institution's programs and curricula. NCATE (n.d.) defines dispositions as the "values, commitments, and professional ethics that influence behaviors toward students, families, colleagues, and communities and affect student learning, motivation, and development as well as the educator's own professional growth." Much debate has been caused around NCATE's use of the phrase "social justice" in relation to dispositions. Up until 2006, one could access the NCATE online glossary through its Web site and find social justice listed as an example disposition that university teacher preparation programs could have for current and future educators in their programs. In 2006, however, while NCATE was under review by a U.S. Department of Education committee partly responsible for recognizing accreditation bodies for teacher preparation programs in the United States, a movement was launched by conservatives to demand that NCATE drop any

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reference to social justice as an example disposition for educators. At the committee hearing, NCATE President Arthur Wise announced that the council would be dropping the term *social justice* from its glossary. NCATE went on to receive a 5-year renewal as a Department of Education-recognized accrediting body for higher education teacher preparation programs ("A Spirited Disposition Debate," 2006). In the most recent NCATE document on professional standards for teacher preparation accreditation, NCATE (2008) clarifies its "commitment" to social justice but does so by going out of its way to frame this commitment within the language of the No Child Left Behind Act. "When the education profession, the public, and policymakers demand that all children be taught by well prepared teachers, then no child will be left behind and social justice will be advanced" (p. 7).

Although one may consider that the debate over the inclusion of terms such as social justice among example dispositions is much to do about nothing, this debate has had real impact on education programs across the United States. For example, during this whole debate over NCATE and social justice, my university's School of Education has been engaged in a protracted renewal of our NCATE accreditation. When we began to reformulate our mission statement during the period that NCATE had it as an example disposition, we modified our mission statement to include the phrase that we were "guided by a commitment to social justice." Later, when we decided to once again revise our mission statement, NCATE had dropped social justice from its glossary's disposition entry, and we decided to also drop it from our mission statement in favor of the idea of working to "advance the common good." We could easily justify, for example, a program in critical pedagogy with a mission statement that included social justice as a goal—not as easily, however, without it in our mission statement; during this period, we also lost our doctoral program in critical pedagogy.

The debate over NCATE's use of the term *social justice* really centers on broader issues: To what end do we educate? Should educators be expected to adhere to certain principles and be oriented by specific dispositions?

In the field of adult education, discussions of and debates over dispositions, or values, commitments, and ethics, have generally revolved around the social purpose of adult education (Cunningham, 1989; Heaney, 2000; Merriam & Brockett, 2007), professionalization of the field (Collins, 1991; Johnson Bailey, Tisdell, & Cervero, 1994), standards for graduate programs (Commission of Professors of Adult Education, 1986, 2008), codes of ethics for adult educators (Cunningham, 1992; Sork & Welock, 1992), and civic education and participation (Gastil, 2004). Dispositions, defined as those attributes that orient a person toward schooling, have seen recent attention in the literature on participation in formal lifelong learning initiatives (Cieslik, 2006; Mok & Kwong, 1999). Greany (2003), for example, lists the five dispositions he and others at the Campaign for Learning consider essential in order to make adults more receptive to lifelong learning: readiness, resilience, resourcefulness, remembering, and reflectiveness. The fact that these dispositions for participation in lifelong learning are often part and parcel of the neoliberal educational agenda has not gone unnoticed in the field. Warren and Webb (2007) make this point evident when they

challenge the discourse of concepts such as “the responsible learner,” “learning career,” and “learning culture” from which dispositions toward learning are derived that do not, in their opinion, escape the hegemony of neoliberal thinking. In the end, these dispositions are imposed on the worker who must always meet the learning demands of capital, on capital’s terms.

With this brief review of related literature, we can see that discussions on what NCATE would label dispositions are not alien to the field of adult education. Whether implicit in our practice or explicitly defined, dispositions as the “values of those who are responsible for the program determine what is actually taught” (Cervero & Wilson, 1994, p. 163). Moreover, because adult education graduate programs must often adhere to NCATE-driven mandates within the schools of education in which they are generally housed, adult educators should be attuned to and engaged in the specific debates over dispositions appropriate for our programs. To this end, this article identifies dispositions that can be considered appropriate for a social justice-oriented adult education. It could be argued that this limits the relevancy of these dispositions to those in what Merriam and Brockett (2007) call the “unacknowledged side of practice.” Nevertheless, with careful consideration of the different historical and social contexts in which we work, these dispositions can be seen as a framework to guide any adult education practice and adult educator preparation programs interested in maintaining the historical affinity between our field and the goal of social justice. I hope to make this more evident by demonstrating the dispositions in contemporary and historic pedagogical practice within the United States.

## Method

This article sits at the crossroads between two larger research projects. One project consists of an investigation of the pedagogy of Ernesto Che Guevara. The other project is a joint effort with Stephen Brookfield that seeks to revitalize the radical tradition in adult education. As a part of the latter project, I have studied the pedagogy praxis of various social movements in the United States and Latin America.

The research on the pedagogy of Ernesto Che Guevara consists of an article (Holst, 2009a) on the pedagogical themes of Guevara’s praxis. In addition, and as a foundation for this current article, I have identified the central dispositions embedded in Guevara’s pedagogical praxis. The dispositions were identified through a thematic analysis of the approximately 2,000 pages of Guevara’s works available in English translation. The research began with the development of a table organizing in chronological order the approximately 150 books, articles, interviews, speech transcripts and recordings, and letters of Guevara scattered across the 27 Guevara-authored books, pamphlets, edited compilations, and audio recordings of his work. These texts were read and analyzed chronologically for their pedagogical and dispositional content. As a form of triangulation, I used what I consider to be the most important biographies (Gadea, 1972; Lavretsky, 1976; Rojo, 1968; Taibo, 1997) and secondary sources on the educational and political thought and practice of Guevara in English (Castro, 1994;

Dreke, 2002; Gillette, 1972; Judson, 1984; Löwy, 1973, 1997; McLaren, 2000; Piñeiro, 2001; Villegas, 1997a, 1997b) and Spanish (Bayo, 1960; Borrego, 2004; Cátedra "Ernesto Che Guevara," 2001; Hart Dávalos, 1994; Martínez Heredia, 1989; Turner Martí, 1999, 2002) as two other comparative sources on the dispositions present in Che's ideas and practice. Guevara developed these dispositions in the context of revolutionary Cuba, but he also worked to instill them among the people he worked with in the Congo (Guevara, 2000) and Bolivia (Guevara, 1994).

Ernesto Che Guevara worked in very specific historical situations not present for adult educators in the United States. Considering this fact, I decided to use the dispositions as a part of the thematic lens through which I analyzed social movements. The dispositions identified in the pedagogical praxis of Guevara are also present in U.S. social movements. From this, I conclude that these dispositions have a certain universality for social justice pedagogical practice but must be rooted in the specific geographical and historical contexts in which we work.

As with a related article on training (Holst, 2009b), the research on social movements for this article consisted of historical and philosophical inquiry (Merriam & Simpson, 1995) into the pedagogical praxis of social movements and social movement organizations (SMOs). Merriam and Simpson (1995) state that historical research can add "to the knowledge and understanding of present practice" (p. 77). The philosophical aspect of the research that "concerns itself with questions of concept" (p. 89) dealt with the identification of the dispositions embedded implicitly and explicitly in the work of social movements. Further following Merriam and Simpson, this research can be considered to present what they call "borderline cases" or those cases "in which a concept is stretched or applied beyond its common usage" (p. 89). The social movement sources I draw upon, and the dispositions I identified in the praxis of Che and the U.S. social movements, can be considered as uncommon, yet as borderline cases, they make us consider the idea of dispositions and the debates around them in new ways.

I employed discourse analysis for research on social movements (Johnston, 2002). The discourse of social movements is found in the texts produced by the movements. Johnston (2002) identifies three levels of social movement discourse: world historical discourses, organizational discourse, and discourse produced by individuals involved in social movements. The social movement discourse I analyzed came from all three levels. Specifically, I drew from SMO archives, SMO newspapers, published compilations of social movement documents, autobiographies of social movement activists, and secondary sources on social movements. Following Johnston, the discourse analysis was "characterized by an intensive focus on movement-related texts to identify patterns, linkages, and structures of ideas" (p. 69) within and between social movements. As mentioned previously, however, my analysis of the social movement discourse was focused on the identifying the dispositions previously found in the theory and practice of Ernesto Che Guevara. Within social movement discourse, it is common, as Johnston states, to use qualitative data reduction techniques to "order a wide variety of written and spoken textual materials by categories" (p. 69). In my case, the categories were given by my previous research on Ernesto Che Guevara.

The following U.S. social movements and SMOs were analyzed as a part of the research: the Abolitionist Movement, and in particular John Brown; the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF); the civil rights movement, and in particular the organizational work of W. E. B. Du Bois, Paul Robeson, Ella Baker, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Highlander Folk School, Septima Clark, Dorothy Cotton, Bernice Robinson, and the Citizenship Schools; the Black Panther Party; Malcolm X; new forms of labor organizing in workers' centers and non-union-based coalitions such as the Coalition of Immokalee Workers; and contemporary popular education work of Project South, the School of Unity and Liberation (SOUL), and the Poor People's Economic and Human Rights Campaign.

By way of introduction, the following dispositions were identified within the pedagogical work of Ernesto Che Guevara and later in the social movements: internationalism/anti-imperialism; intrinsic motivation of love and empathy; discipline; honesty and self-criticality; flexibility in thinking and audacity; and a willingness to sacrifice, a rejection of privilege, and an orientation toward service. In what follows, I will detail these dispositions and relate them to the practice of education. I will also demonstrate the presence of these dispositions in historical and contemporary social justice-oriented education and activism in the United States.

## **Dispositions, Social Movements, and Adult Education**

In the introduction I raised two questions: To what end do we educate? and Should educators be expected to adhere to certain principles and be oriented by specific dispositions? Social movements have addressed these questions by infusing their pedagogical practice with specific identifiable dispositions that, when taken as a whole, provide a framework for a social justice-oriented education.

### *Internationalism, Anti-Imperialism*

Despite the United States's historical emergence as an imperialist power, there is a long standing anti-imperialist and internationalist tradition within the United States. Nineteenth-century literary figures Henry David Thoreau and Mark Twain opposed imperialist wars against México and the Philippines, respectively. From an organizational perspective, the WILPF founded in 1915 in opposition to World War I with Jane Addams as its first president is an example of an organization whose U.S. branches have educated and organized in opposition to U.S. imperialism and in favor of internationalist principles of social justice and peace for more than a century.

In the history of the African American freedom movement, prominent leaders, often to their own personal detriment, have linked the struggle of African Americans to the international struggle against colonial and imperial subjugation. W. E. B. Du Bois, for example, understood that his pan-Africanist efforts on behalf of ending colonialism in Africa were part and parcel of the struggle of African Americans in the

United States. For Du Bois (2001), "To help bear the burden of Africa does not mean any lessening of effort in our own problem at home. Rather it means increased interest" (p. 104). Du Bois, along with Paul Robeson, were signatories to the Civil Rights Congress's 1951 petition to the United Nations calling on relief of genocide against African Americans by the U.S. government. This famous "we charge genocide" petition was an effort to internationalize the African American freedom struggle while highlighting the importance of the struggle in the United States for the peoples of the world. As fellow signatory William Patterson (1970) stated, "a policy of discrimination at home must inevitably create racist commodities for export abroad—must inevitably tend toward war" (p. xv).

In the decade after the genocide petition, Malcolm X (1989) would insist that the African American struggle must be elevated from a domestically based civil rights issue to an internationally based issue of human rights. Malcolm X's travels to Africa in the early 1960s developed into a colearning relationship between him and several African liberation movement leaders. He returned from these travels convinced that "African problems are our problems and our problems are African problems" (p. 73). From this, he insisted that the problems facing the African American minority in the United States should be taken to the United Nations as a human rights issue where it could be taken up by the African, Asian, and Latin American—Che Guevara's Tricontinental—world majority. Here the struggle of African Americans in the United States would take its rightful place as one example of the then unfolding "global rebellion of the oppressed against the oppressor" (p. 217).

### *Intrinsic Motivation of Love and Empathy*

Our educational programs should work to develop in students and educators an intrinsic motivation driven by love and empathy for others. For educators such as Myles Horton, these dispositions come before, yet inform, methods and techniques. In explaining the elements of a radical education, Horton says he would put "loving people first" (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 177).

These dispositions can be found in the best of social justice movements in the United States. Involvement in such movements, itself, often sparks a humanistic, intrinsic motivation. In the civil rights movement, for example, love and empathy were at the heart of what propelled people to involve themselves in what was often very dangerous activities given the harsh repression faced by activists. As one Freedom School trainee wrote after participating in the training sessions before heading south in 1964, "Now that I've felt what it is to be involved and committed, it seems hard to believe that I could be content with any other kind of life" (as quoted in Sutherland, 1965, p. 24). When people organize, there is a dialectical relationship that emerges between personal and collective power that motivates individuals and collectives to push forward on demands as victories build upon one another or as people see others making gains in similar contexts. Intrinsic motivation for social justice takes root when people no longer see engagement in movement activity as a choice; it

becomes something they have to do. The activist and artist Paul Robeson (1988) expressed this succinctly when he explained his support of the Spanish Republic in the 1930s. "The artist must elect to fight for Freedom or for Slavery. I have made my choice. I had no alternative" (p. 52). Robeson spoke of this motivation as the "power of spirit" at "the very soul" of African American people.

### *Discipline*

Strict discipline of a military nature found in the guerrilla units led by Che Guevara can be found in the history of armed struggle-oriented U.S. social movements. It, like the discipline of Guevara's units, however, is motivated and expressed more in terms of internal convictions to fight for social justice than in externally imposed sanctions or outward manifestations of hierarchy. John Brown's Kansas free-state militia, for example, adhered to a strict code of military discipline, yet this was codified in a highly democratic set of bylaws to which members voluntarily adhered (Du Bois, 1972). The Black Panther Party (Foner, 1970) also developed a strict set of rules for its membership.

Beyond examples of a more military nature, training in social movements instills people with a discipline, confidence, and conviction that only through their own efforts things can change. Ella Baker always worked to instill in local people the idea that they were both responsible for and capable of solving their own problems if they engaged in collective action. Honesty, hard work, and organizational and individual discipline were central dispositions in her training work (Baker, 1972, 1980; Grant, 1998; Ransby, 2003).

### *Honesty, Truth, and Self-Criticism*

Honesty and truth are constant themes throughout the work of Du Bois. In the founding document of the Niagara Movement ratified on the 100th anniversary of John Brown's birthday, we find the following statement: "We . . . believe in John Brown, in that incarnate spirit of justice, that hatred of a lie, that willingness to sacrifice money, reputation, and life itself on the altar of right" (Du Bois, 2001, p. 33). In Du Bois's journalist work with the NAACP newspaper *The Crisis*, he made the truth of the African American situation a weapon in the struggle for freedom. As a scholar, he argued that "the greatest gift a scholar can bring to Learning is Reverence of Truth" (Du Bois, 2001, p. 23).

A self-critical stance, both toward oneself and one's people, is evident in the work of Malcolm X. His disapproval of the strict nonviolence of the civil rights movement was a critical stance toward the movement. He argued that it made no sense for African Americans to act violently as U.S. soldiers in imperial wars overseas and to then constantly turn the other cheek when faced with racist violence at home. He made a point of exposing this contradiction in his educational oratory. Like Guevara, as critical as he was of others, he was equally self-critical and openly discussed this self-criticality as a way of instilling it in others. This can be seen in his open break

with the ideas of the Nation of Islam as well as in his personal and political transformation after his visits to Mecca and Africa. In a public statement on his changing views as a result of these travels, he says that he has "always been a man who tries to face facts, and to accept reality of life as new experiences and knowledge unfold it" (Malcolm X, 1989, p. 60)

### *Creative, Flexible, Nondogmatic Thinking and Audacity*

Our programs should develop students disposed to a critical, nondogmatic understanding of the political economy of exploitation with the analytical flexibility to understand how this plays out in different ways and in different areas in today's globalized society. We can see this being done in contemporary popular education-oriented organizations such as Project South, based in Atlanta, Georgia; and SOUL, based in Oakland, California. Both of these organizations provide participatory popular education training on, among other issues, the nature of globalization both internationally and in local communities in the United States. Their purpose is to put education at the service of movements, orienting them toward the idea that unity among poor and oppressed people locally and internationally is necessary to build a social just order. Although some may argue that these organizations are on the margins of the field, even within the area of human resource development (HRD), leading authors (Bierema, 2000; Fenwick, 2000) are calling for an orientation that puts human values, social justice, and a critical understanding of globalization at the heart of our practice of adult education.

The historical levels of migration and immigration today are part and parcel of neoliberal globalization (Guskin & Wilson, 2007; Sassen, 1998). The recent waves of immigration to the United States have been accompanied by innovative social movement activism among immigrant workers. These workers are some of the most vulnerable and oppressed sectors of U.S. society, and yet they have exhibited an audacity that has put them at the forefront of community, citizen rights, and labor activism. The disposition of audacity underlies the popular slogan "*Sí, se puede*" (Yes, we can) of the immigrant rights movement in the United States.

### *Service, Sacrifice, and Opposing Privileges*

We should educate for the development of service-oriented people willing to make sacrifices for others. Aptheker comments that central to Du Bois's educational philosophy was "the demand for sacrifice, for a life of service, and an insistence that while such a life will bring hardships and temptations it also will bring fulfillment" (in Du Bois, 2001, p. xiii). The best of social activists have always embodied this disposition. Activists rarely attain personal benefit from the risk taking involved in organizing and educating for change, which, more often than not, results in personal sacrifice.

This disposition is also evident in disaster situations in the United States. When natural disasters hit communities, it is common that hundreds and, at times, thousands

of people from around the country respond by immediately dropping everything and showing up on the scene to volunteer their efforts to save people and restore communities. García (2005) reports on individual efforts and those of Veterans for Peace in the Gulf Coast region after hurricane Katrina. These grassroots efforts grew out of and posed a direct challenge to the failed neoliberal response effort of the various governmental agencies. This pedagogical aspect of service was a central impulse behind the service programs of the Black Panther Party. They provided free services such as schooling, health care, and before-school breakfasts as an example of their philosophy of serving the people, as a way to expose government neglect, as a way to exemplify socialist principles, and as a way to instill an orientation to service in those who participated in these programs.

## Conclusion

Whereas the debate over NCATE and social justice can rightly be seen as part and parcel of the further intrusion of a conservative neoliberal agenda in education programs, it does ask us to consider what dispositions are appropriate for our programs. At the heart of the social movements analyzed in this article is the creation of human beings with the dispositions to create and take advantage of a democratic, participatory, and cooperative society. Ernesto Che Guevara famously described this as the creation of *el hombre nuevo* (the new person). As we look out on a world where about half of the world's population lives on less than two dollars per day, this social movement goal seems less and less like a politically charged phrase and more like dispositions meeting the needs of a growing majority of the world's population.

Meeting the needs of society's majorities is by no means a goal outside of even the most mainstream conceptualizations of adult education. Given the growing polarization in the United States and the world as a whole, and the degrading living standards of more and more people, mainstream goals merge with the historical goals of social movements.

In other words, if adult education is to remain relevant and even minimally committed to advancing social justice, we should consider the dispositions from our country's various progressive social movements as increasingly relevant for today's practices. Planning oriented toward the dispositions outline in this article, therefore, should not be seen as putting programs on the margins of the field but, rather, as anchoring them within the best of our own traditions.

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## Bio

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