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Fiction writing and lifelong learning: Reflecting on the role of the educators in fostering well-being and happiness for adult learners

Patricia A. Gouthro, Susan M. Holloway, Erin J. Careless

Adult educators frequently encourage students to reflect upon their beliefs as educators to consider why they choose particular teaching methods and to assess what they believe are important learning objectives. Students are encouraged to write reflective learning journals, develop philosophical mission statements, and engage in class discussions considering the purpose of adult learning (Brookfield, 1995). These exercises would seem to suggest that adult educators are well aware of the broader goals of adult learning, and that they believe in encouraging their students to reflect upon the reasons why they should engage as lifelong learners. Yet all too often, support for education is provided primarily to attain economic objectives and the capacity to be competitive in a globalized economy. Although a recent report by Schuller and Watson (2009) on lifelong learning argues that policy makers are gradually conceding the need to understand learning in broader ways, their arguments are still framed in language shaped by an economic agenda. Their study, and the reports such as Field's (2009) report that explores learning and well-being, point to the challenges of engaging with policy makers around the potential for adult learning to enhance quality of life for many learners without falling into a reductionist approach that consistently reiterates fiscal return as the main rationale for education.

This paper draws upon a Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) funded study on lifelong learning, citizenship and fiction writing, to assess how learning connected to fiction writing and reading may be important when considering the role of educators in fostering well-being and happiness for their students. As educators we may not always provide learning opportunities that have readily measurable outputs. Instead, our goal should be to explore the purpose of education so as to attain a deeper understanding of the teaching/learning processes that can enable learners to grow and develop as citizens, family members, and workers. While this may also be connected with economic growth, it is not limited to just considering that as the primary objective for lifelong learning. A more holistic

approach to education may generate opportunities for fostering well-being that would benefit both society and learners.

Literature Review

Within the rhetoric of neoliberal discourses, there is an emphasis on individualism whereby learners assume responsibility for wisely shaping personal learning trajectories. One problem with emphasizing individual responsibility for educational attainment as a means of being successful in the “new economy”, as Fenwick (2004) argues, is that “structural inequalities such as gendered work conditions and gendered determinations of skill are easily masked amidst ideals of self-reliance and illusions of unlimited choice” (p. 170). The reality of these structural barriers and deterrents is glossed over rather than critically examined within neoliberal discourses around learning. “Don Watson (2003) describes the all-pervasive language of neoliberal managerialism as ‘unable to convey any human emotion, including the most basic ones such as happiness, sympathy, greed, envy, love or lust. You cannot’ he says ‘tell a joke in this language, or write a poem, or sing a song. It is a language without human provenance or possibility’” (p. 15, quoted in Davies, p. 1). Neoliberalism speaks a rhetoric that ignores the value of emotional and personal happiness as part of a holistic vision of a life well lived.

At the same time, within a neoliberal framework, the rationale for educational investment is linked with being competitive in a globalized world (Olssen & Peters, 2005). The emphasis on learning connected to the marketplace leads to what critical theorists such as Habermas (1987) describe as a technical-rational approach to learning, whereby education is viewed primarily as an instrumental strategy for attaining particular, often measurable goals. In this climate, credentials are often perceived to be more important than learning experiences, specific skills are targeted as educational objectives, and education is perceived to be an investment whose worth is calculated in terms of economic pay-offs. As Nussbaum puts it, “The ability to think and argue for oneself looks to many people like something dispensable if what we want are marketable outputs of a quantifiable nature” (p. 48).

Recent interest in research around well-being and happiness (Layard, 2005; Shuller & Watson, 2009) suggests that this limited scope for understanding the purpose of

education screens out many other important social benefits connected to furthering opportunities for learning. Field (2009: 12) notes that although in the past couple of decades the policy sectors have supported education primarily as a form of 'skill enhancement' designed to improve 'national competitiveness', increasingly there is an acknowledgement that education needs to be taken up in a broader way.

Education is important for many different reasons, including creating a greater sense of social cohesion, promoting health, and fostering citizen engagement.

As Layard (2005) argues, the problem with using financial wealth as a primary indicator of both individual and social well-being and happiness, is that research indicates that once people attain a certain level of financial comfort, to put it simply, more money does not necessarily buy more happiness. He argues that 'once subsistence income is guaranteed, making people happier is not easy. If we want people to be happier, we really have to know what conditions generate happiness and how to cultivate them" (p. 4). Therefore, justifying support or funding for education only if it is connected to potential economic benefits or pay-offs does not automatically result in having a society where its members experience a greater sense of happiness or well-being.

As adult educators, it is important to explore alternative visions and strategies for learning, to consider the benefits and challenges of creating educational opportunities throughout the lifespan where learning may enhance well being and happiness. These kinds of discussions are often linked to philosophical debates pertaining to what constitutes a 'good life' (Gouthro, 2010). By looking at fiction reading and writing we may be able to explore some of the issues that are central to these debates.

The Research Study

This Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) study, *Creating a Canadian 'Voice': Lifelong Learning, the Craft of Fiction Writing and Citizenship*, involves interviews with between thirty and forty authors as well as interviews with approximately fifteen to twenty 'key informants' in the publishing, education and policy sectors. The interviews with the authors use a life history approach, in exploring the various factors that have contributed to their development as writers. While most of the interviews are with Canadian writers, some interviews with

American and UK authors have been included for the purpose of cross-cultural comparison. The key informant interviews are more focused on learning about the programs, funding opportunities, and educational supports linked with developing fiction writing. In addition, an extensive literature review looks at the ways in which fiction writing and reading contributes to learning opportunities throughout the lifespan. As a part of this study we have also been interested in looking at pedagogical strategies that can be developed to use fiction writing and reading in various kinds of learning contexts.

Findings

Fiction writing and reading provides opportunities for learning in formal, non-formal, and informal contexts. Through reading and writing fiction, learners have opportunities to explore alternative perspectives, gain insights into the problems and challenges that others face, and to envision alternative ways of understanding the world. Through fiction, readers are exposed to varying viewpoints from different characters, introduced to new environments, and challenged to question their own underlying assumptions and beliefs. Fiction reading and writing may provide opportunities for learning throughout the lifespan, from early childhood stories being read at the local library to continuing education courses for adults in creative writing. In addition to courses or programs that explicitly focus on writing and reading skills, fiction may also be a means to introduce ethical debates, thought provoking issues, and considerations around class, gender, ability as well as diversity and inclusion issues in more multi-disciplinary contexts.

Many of these concerns may be linked to assessing what kinds of social changes and issues need to be addressed to create the 'good life' both for individuals, and for the broader society. For example, several of the authors we spoke to discussed issues pertaining to gender equality and how that affected their work as writers. Literary author and poet, Daphne Marlatt, discusses her experience of being a writer during the time of the feminist movement (second wave feminism):

It was so all-involving and so exciting because there was this new thinking going on. There was this sense of placing women's concerns and values, women's approach to philosophy, psychology, to language, front and centre. And it was very liberating, to use what is now a rather old word.

The issues that have been taken up by women as authors often reflect broader social concerns. Understanding that living within a world that is shaped by various cultural, political, and economic constraints linked with gender is important if women, and their allies, are to make effective social changes.

Crime fiction author Sara Paretsky gives an example of how through the development of her well-known protagonist, VI Warshawski, she was able to challenge many of the social constructs that create restrictive gender roles that were characteristic both of crime fiction and the broader society in which she was raised: It's interesting that widows within British and American crime fiction are considered morally suspect; they've made themselves sexually available. You see that often with Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers, that the widow and the divorced woman is not ever going to be the main villain, but is not a moral agent for good. So I wanted to change that. I wanted to create a woman who was like me and my friends. She was doing a job that didn't exist when she started school, she had a sex life that didn't determine her morality, and she had to solve problems on her own, as women always have.

Before Sara Paretsky became an established writer, there were few women portrayed as successful private investigators in fiction. As well as being a driving force in establishing Sisters in Crime (an organization that supports women mystery writers), through her writing Paretsky has helped to reshape the landscape of the crime fiction-writing world, so that many women are now able to be successful in publishing thrillers with strong female protagonists.

Often when writers take up controversial issues in fiction, it may provoke debate, and sometimes strong resistance. Crime fiction writer Garry Ryan explains:

It was a conscious decision to make the protagonist gay, and there was a cost to that...I ran into a woman at a writing event in Calgary and she had been a judge of the book, and she said 'Oh, that was about that homosexual'. Just the way she said the word was a real eye-opener for me.

Ryan comes from a teaching background. Although he is a straight man, he believes it is important to use his writing to explore more challenging social issues. He also argues that writing can be beneficial for youth, saying "I taught kids; they learned a lot of the skills that they needed through creative writing. It didn't necessarily have to

be a formal essay. And I think the research backs that up; it's about familiarity with writing, clarifying your message. It's not the five paragraph essay that necessarily teaches you to write".

Through creative writing, educators can also encourage learners to take up their own concerns and ideas, and explore alternative perspectives and viewpoints. Learning connected to fiction writing and reading may enhance broader literacy and writing skills. One children's author, Kari-Lynn Winters, who is also a literacy professor in Education reflected upon her upbringing where her parents used writing primarily for "functional purposes" but notes that they "did not value literacy in the same way that my husband and I do – reading every day, building an extensive home library, encouraging daily writing practices to our children." Through these approaches, a foundation for lifelong learning connected to an appreciation of the value of fiction reading and writing can be established.

This may lead to learning opportunities in adulthood that incorporate fiction writing and reading. In addition to specific programs that are designed to foster creative writing opportunities, there are many informal activities such as book clubs where ideas can be debated and discussed. Electronic forums, such as Dorothy L (a crime fiction forum), provide opportunities to individuals to talk about books that they are reading and issues that they find interesting.

Adult educators might also want to consider how fiction can be incorporated into various types of curriculum to enhance learning opportunities. For example, in debates around citizenship or inclusion and diversity issues, fiction can provide important insights. Literary author Nino Ricci reflects upon the value of literature in helping to explore the immigrant experience as well as issues pertaining to citizenship and being a Canadian. He explains:

Literature reflects where people are. Margaret Atwood said it so well in *Survival*, which was really the first look at Canadian culture. If you don't have that kind of mirror, how can you know where you are? Literature is one primary place to see that; a place not only to understand yourself, but to feel affirmed in who you are. To say, I exist too and my existence has meaning in my difference. I don't have to be something else. Someone has spoken my experience, so therefore my experience is validated. I think that's a very important aspect of what literature does, and that has to come out of the community.

Through fiction writing and reading, learners may reflect upon not only their own experiences, but those of other learners. At the same time, learners must develop critical literacy skills in which they consider social, political, and cultural experiences to reflect upon social justice issues such as racial and gender inequalities or the process of reading and writing fiction may simply reinforce existing beliefs and stereotypes (Holloway & Gouthro, 2011).

Reflection and Conclusion

Through this study we have found that many of the writers have been involved in writing organizations, taught or participated in writing classes, or have worked as mentors in assisting the development of other writers. Often, new writers assume when they bring their creative writing into a workshop, the most important aspect will be the feedback they get on their own work. However, Nicole Markotic, a fiction writer and professor of creative writing contends, “If you can become a good critic, like if you can tell what a story needs, then you become a better writer.” Thus learning how to critique the writing of others plays a role in augmenting one’s own creativity. Others, such as literary author Emma Donoghue, prefer a more solitary or self-directed approach, where her engagement with ideas from others is more through the actual reading and writing, than through debate, dialogue, or discussion. She explains, “I think I take part in the world of literature more by reading people’s books and having them read mine. You influence each other in that way, but you don’t want to get together in a café.”

Grassroots organizations and programs that engage emerging authors with established writers may help them to reflect critically upon their work. Honest and educative critique can be helpful, because as one key informant noted wryly ‘Your friends love you more than they love your writing’. Many of the authors in this study commented on how creative writing classes help individuals to think through and move beyond clichés in their own writing. Cliches are indicative of how we accept societal norms, so by inverting, parodying, and playing with clichés, the writing process insists on critical, imaginative conceptualizations of how to shape our thinking and understanding of the world. In thinking about teaching learners to engage in a critical, creative writing process, Rebecca O’Rourke explains:

Today, it is a means of encouraging all students to engage in the collective and social processes of creative writing from which we believe good writing, and good writers, develop. But more than this, in the highly alienated and commoditised world of mass higher education, creative writing in education can provide space for sanctuary and play, for pleasure and steep learning; space to explore diversity on and off the page; space for important intergenerational learning to happen through and about writing.

Within other educational contexts, fiction writing and reading may be incorporated in innovative ways to engage learners and encourage them to think more deeply about values and belief systems. If adult educators are to challenge a neoliberal focus on learning that prioritizes learning connected to the marketplace over all other kinds of learning, they need to think about the value and benefits of exploring alternative and more holistic approaches to education. Many benefits may emerge from using creative and artistic approaches to learning (Willis, 2011), which may be useful in the workforce, but might also be important for other kinds of learning leading to an enhanced sense of well-being.

Ultimately, if learning is to be considered an integral aspect of creating a society in which the 'good life' is understood to be more substantive than having a high quality of consumption opportunities, we need to critically reflect upon the purposes of adult education. Recalling what Freire (2005) had to say about the importance of reading and writing:

We must remember that there is a dynamic movement between thought, language, and reality that, if well understood, results in a greater creative capacity. The more we experience the dynamics of such movement, the more we become critical subjects concerning the process of knowing, teaching, learning, reading, writing, and studying. (p. 3)

Good thinking involves all of these components. And Freire (2005) argues these dynamics that promote "consciousness" and "expressiveness" (p. 2) simultaneously contribute to what will yield "to achieving full citizenship" (p. 3). Learning through fiction reading and writing may be one way to consider an alternative perspective for adult learning that fosters active citizenry and well-being.

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