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Learning to be critically reflective: Exploring fiction writing and adult learning

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Abstract

Many educators in adult, community, and higher education contexts are concerned with fostering reflective learning amongst their students. This paper explores the concept of critical reflection and considers how engaging with fiction may be an innovative pedagogical approach to support critical learning opportunities. Drawing upon interviews with fiction writers, ways in which critical reflection may be encouraged in connection to reading and writing fiction are taken up by exploring three different thematic areas that relate to a Habermasian framework of knowledge constitutive approaches to learning. These different areas can be categorized as; a) technical-rational, b) humanistic, and c) critical or emancipatory. The first of these considers critical reflection as a way to develop technical capacities as a creative writer. The next section takes up a humanistic framework to explore the value of individual and collective learning opportunities to enhance personal growth and critical reflection. The third area of discussion considers a deeper critical or emancipatory framework of learning through critical reflection which may lead to social change. The paper concludes by considering the value of arts-informed adult education approaches, such as those related to fiction writing, to enhance the development of critical reflection amongst adult learners.

Introduction

The capacity for critical reflection or what is sometimes termed reflexivity is valued as a key capability that educators strive to teach their students in higher education programs, and is

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perceived to be a valuable skill or quality that can enhance contributions in both the paid workplace and in community-based settings (Bastrup-Birk and Wildemeersch, 2011; Griggs et al., 2015; Ryan, 2012). Educators in adult, community, and higher education contexts are often concerned with fostering reflective learning amongst their students – but developing this capacity amongst learners often poses multiple challenges (Brookfield, 2005; Authors, 2009). This paper explores how insights into the development of critical reflection amongst adult learners may be fostered by examining the processes involved in reading and writing fiction and considers opportunities to incorporate fiction into different adult learning contexts. Beginning with a brief discussion of literature that uses a Habermasian framework of knowledge to assess different perspectives on critical reflection and learning, the paper then provides a brief overview of two research studies that explore connections between lifelong learning and fiction. Drawing upon interviews with fiction writers, some of the ways in which reflective learning may be connected to reading and writing fiction are taken up by exploring three different thematic areas that relate to a Habermasian framework that organizes different knowledge constitutive approaches to learning. The first of these considers critical reflection as a way to develop technical capacities as a creative writer. The next section takes up a humanistic framework to explore the value of individual and collective learning opportunities to enhance personal growth and critical reflection. The third area of discussion considers a deeper critical or emancipatory framework which may lead to social change for examining critical reflection in connection to fiction writing. The paper concludes by considering the value of arts-informed adult education approaches, such as those related to fiction writing, to enhance the development of critical reflection amongst adult learners.

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Critical Reflection and Adult Learners

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Educators working with adults draw upon the notion of critical reflection to inform their understanding of informal and non-formal learning that may occur in the workplace, homeplace and in the community, as well as in formal learning contexts such as colleges or universities. At a broad level, Ryan and Ryan (2015) define reflection as: '(1) making sense of experience; and importantly, (2) reimagining future experience' (2015, 15). Freire (2007; c. 1974) points out that as humans we are unique in our capacity to apprehend time so that we can look at current experience, make connections to the past, and imagine different possibilities for the future. Reflection is therefore important not only in terms of how it helps us to make sense of our prior experiences, but also because it can inform future actions. Critical reflection is an integral aspect of our human capacity to learn.

The ways in which critical reflection has been taken up in the literature around adult learning varies significantly. In her survey of critical reflection in adult education discourses, von Woerken points out that 'where some speak of reflection, others speak of critical reflection, reflexivity, critical self-reflection, or critical thinking. It is often not clear what the difference is, or even if there is a difference, between these terms' (2010, 340). Reflexivity is a term preferred by some educators to speak to deeper, more imaginative ways of approaching critical reflection (Bastrup-Birke & Wildemeersch, 2011), while others discuss how different levels of critical reflection, including those that are more complex, can be fostered in educational contexts (Griggs et all, 2015). Wilson (2009) argues that 'there is a tendency to think of reflection as a unilateral construct when it actually may be many ideas' (p. 79). Some theorists focus on critical reflection more as an individual, psychological process, whilst others emphasize the dialogical and social component of reflective learning.

In briefly tracing the development of critical reflection as on ongoing topic of debate within adult, community, and higher education discourses, we think that it is useful to refer to Habermas (1972) and the way in which critical adult educators such as Brookfield (2005),

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Kucukaydin and Cranton (2013), Mezirow (1981), Newman (1999), and Welton (1993) have used his theories to explore learning. A Habermasian framework explores how knowledge is organized into three different categories; a) technical-rational, which has a more positivistic or scientific approach to reason, that uses means-end approach to understand the purpose of learning, b) practical, in which learning is often taken up under a humanistic umbrella, to focus how we make meaning of our personal experiences as well as the ways in which people relate and communicate with one another in intersubjective ways, and c) a deeper critical or emancipatory approach, which examines the importance of learning in critiquing hegemonic power and striving for radical social change.

Donald Schön (1987), whose research still informs current adult education discourses around reflection, particularly in workplace and medical contexts, notes that professionals often engage in reflective practice that may or may not always be conscious, as individuals attain greater skills connected with practical experience. Educators have a role to play in using strategies to encourage learners to reflect critically and gain insights into how they develop their skills. Brookfield (2005) notes, however, that the type of reflection described in Schon's work is often not that deep. The kinds of learning involved in becoming a better employee or athlete, while of value, frequently remains at a level of technical-rationality with a focus on improving applied skills.

In exploring the capacity for fostering deeper levels of critical reflection, Wilson (2009) notes that for educators and learners, reflection may begin simply as greater awareness of one's assumptions or beliefs. This initial self-understanding may then lead to critical personal insights, (which would fit more into a humanistic framework) and eventually may develop into an understanding of how the issues fit into larger economic, political, and cultural structures and may be aligned with a desire to initiate social change (thus leading to a more emancipatory perspective).

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Understanding and assessing the reflective learning process

A tricky part of understanding critical reflection is that as educators we can never comprehend fully the processes involved in learners moving from one level of knowledge to another, thereby attaining deeper levels of insight. We can only get glimpses of this process when we listen to students share their perspectives in group discussions, read their papers or blogs, or observe their interactions with colleagues in work or community-based contexts.

A technical-rational approach to critical reflection is usually deemed the easiest to assess and evaluate. Individual learners can be asked to reflect upon the development of their particular capabilities and demonstrate improved outcomes, particularly in professional studies or workplace contexts. Boden et al. (2006) argue that reflective practice may have long term beneficial effects, in that it allows adult learners to make connections between materials that they have learned in their courses and their actual work practices. Boud and Harvey point out that at a group level, ‘reflecting together on work issues generates considerable collective learning’ (2012, 25). We can observe a group of students competently negotiating a resolution to a business case study. When a team of medical students through Problem-Based Learning are asked to assess a situation (e.g. fifty-year old white male clutches chest and drops to the floor), it is a fairly straight-forward process to determine if they come to a reasonable diagnosis.

Humanistic learning is more subjective. At the humanistic level, educators speak to the value of reflecting back on one’s own actions/thoughts. Reviewing qualitative responses through activities such personal journaling enables educators to gain insight into the level of critical reflection that students may engage in during different kinds of learning experiences (Hyland-Russell, 2014). Learning at the collective level is also an important aspect of reflection. Groen notes the importance of discussion whereby ‘in essence, we are not trying to

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win in a dialogue; rather the group explores complex difficult issues from many points of view' (2008, 199). Broadening one's perspective, empathizing with others, reflecting upon one's beliefs, and communicating alternative viewpoints, are all foundational components of a more humanistic approach to teaching and learning.

Emancipatory insights are perhaps the most challenging to discern. Critical adult education has a strong social justice orientation that challenges learners to become more conscious of the social, political, economic and cultural factors that shape their lives. African-American educational philosopher, Cornel West, argues that 'it takes courage to think critically'. Challenging hegemony is never easy. He says 'you have to examine those tacit assumptions and unacknowledged presuppositions that the dominant paradigm want to hide and conceal' (2003, 11).

In an action-based research study we might see learners gain confidence as they take on political challenges or in service learning situations we may observe them doing valuable work with participants such as providing tutoring or health care. It is much more difficult and elusive, however, to pin down whether or not learners have developed more sophisticated ways of making sense of political structures and hegemonic belief systems. Some of the most sustained theoretical explorations of the importance of critical reflection have been developed in the work of adult educators whose teaching and research are informed by Mezirow's (1981, 1990) transformative learning theory which explores critical reflection as an essential component of human learning. Mezirow argues that

> transformative learning refers to the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-set) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action (2000, 7-8).

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Mezirow's (1981) initial work on developing transformative learning theory took up Habermas's concepts of learning to consider how reflection can inform different levels of learning. Mezirow explains that by developing a critical approach, 'this understanding of the nature of significant adult learning provides the educator with a rationale for selecting appropriate educational practices and actively resisting social and cultural forces that distort and delimit adult learning' (1997, 11). In assessing Mezirow's contributions, Brookfield (2005, 49) argues that 'here power is regarded as the ability to understand and take action in the world in a way that feels authentically grounded in critical reflection'. Deeper forms of learning, therefore, are often interlinked with the capacity to be critically reflective of not only our personal experiences, but also broader, social and political structures and debates.

Our capacity for critical reflection may be augmented through activities such as reading or writing fiction. An example of this can be seen in the study conducted by Hoggan and Cranton (2015) where undergraduate university students were asked to comment upon a fictional story written by the researchers to see if reading fiction could enhance levels of critical reflection, which they argue is an important precursor to transformative learning

By looking at how fiction writing is connected to lifelong learning experiences, we can see how authors engage in critical reflection at different levels to enhance not only their technical writing skills, but also to explore complex personal and social issues in their fiction writing. This analysis may provide rich insights into understanding the processes of how people learn through critical reflection. From this, we may also consider how fiction can be used as a resource to work with adult learners in a variety of contexts, to help foster their capacities to engage in critical reflection at a deeper level.

Research studies

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This paper draws upon two research studies funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) that look at connections between lifelong learning and fiction writing. The studies each involve life history interviews with over thirty fiction writers, primarily from Canada, and for comparison purposes, a smaller number from the United Kingdom and the United States. As Marshall and Rossman note, 'a life history account can add depth and evocative illustration to any qualitative study' (2011, 152). The studies each include (although they are not drawn upon in this particular paper) interviews with over twenty 'key informants' in policy and program areas connected to fiction writing, such as writing programs and book festivals.

The analysis of findings has entailed careful review of the interview transcripts for thematic coding. As a part of the ethics process for all of the studies, participants were asked if they would be willing to reveal their identity as part of their interviews. At the same time, following Shopes (2011) advice on 'best practice', participants had the option to review their transcripts and edit them. They could also select any sections of transcript that they did not mind leaving in, but wanted to have represented in a way that maintained confidentiality.

In this paper, three subthemes are explored in connection to the general theme of reflective learning, using the three categories of learning under a Habermasian framework to include: a) becoming a skillful writer (a technical-rational approach to critical reflection), b) personal growth and human reflection (a humanistic framework), and c) critical reflection for social change (an emancipatory perspective).

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Becoming a skillful writer

Fiction authors need to develop an array of technical skills to become successful writers. An understanding of these how these skills are attained can provide insights not only into the process of creative writing but also how how learners can engage in critical reflection to gain technical expertise or proficiency. Some of the strategies discussed by fiction authors

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could also be modified to use in various pedagogical contexts for adult learners striving to improve their own writing skills.

Tobin and Tisdell (2015) draw upon different theorists, including the French philosopher Merleau-Ponty, to consider how creative writing may be perceived as an embodied reflective experience. They argue that Merleau-Ponty (1945) draws attention to the role of the body in engaging in reflection, so that "reflection in the form of oral, written, or artistic expression is what the body has perceived. For him, like an arm that reaches or an internal organ that functions, the text created by a writer is both an extension and a part of the body (p. 218). They provide examples of how novice creative writers draw upon bodily knowledge and sensory experience, such as thinking through what it feels like to roll on the floor by actually doing this, reflecting upon the experience, and then trying to articulate this experience in words in a fictionalized narrative.

Fiction authors may draw upon a variety of individual sensory experiences to enhance their technical capabilities as creative writers. For example, Canadian literary writer, Andrew Borkowski, draws upon his background knowledge as a musician to improve his writing. He explains that when he is writing 'it's more of an internal process' whereby he will ask himself questions to discern the rhythm and pattern of the words such as:

> Why does that sentence ring false to me? And how can I fix that? That's when I start to think of it in those sort of rhythmic terms, like is there one too many ideas in that sentence?

The types of questions that Borkowski asks himself demonstrate the kind of tacit knowledge or expertise that Shön (1983) talks about, similar to the way a professional athlete might reflect upon his game to consistently improve his performance. To him, the process of creative writing is linked to having a musical 'ear' – whereby one pays attention to the

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cadence and rhythm of language, as well as the content of the message that one is attempting to communicate to others.

Most writers talked about the importance of learning their craft from other authors, sometimes in educational or mentoring programs, but most frequently by careful and extensive reading of other works of fiction. American mystery writer, Joanna Campbell Slan, explained her strategy to learn from other authors when she switched from a career as a motivational speaker and non-fiction author:

> I've become a real student of other authors. I do that using something I learned through motivational speaking when I offered to interview the best speakers of our time for magazines. That became my own Master Class, so I've done the same thing for different conferences. I've interviewed people and asked questions to further my education and my career.

Slan used the opportunity to ask writers to describe their particular insights into developing technical expertise to reflect upon how she might improve her own writing skills. The questions that she asked were not just about what the authors were writing, but *how* they developed their own skills as author.

Canadian literary writer, Alistair MacLeod, who was also a professor of creative writing, talked about the importance of getting students to reflect upon their work through constructive group feedback from other novice writers. He said:

> It's no good being in a group of people who just tear things down and never write anything. But if you're in a group of people who write and read, they can help you…So, if you write about a woman pouring tea in a cup, and then she talks for two pages. Nobody could talk this long because the tea would be all over her hand, you know? And then the person writing says, Oh, I never thought of that. I

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> would say, You try, you go home and try pouring tea into a cup while you're delivering two-and-a-half pages of [dialogue].

While this story is related in a humorous way, it points to the importance of writers learning to think through the technical aspects of their craft as they write different scenes and develop their characters. Both individual reflection and group discussion can be used to challenge authors to enhance their skills as they learn the craft of fiction writing. Similar strategies could be used to teach adults in other educational contexts, to critically reflect upon their own technical capacities as writers and learners.

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Personal growth and critical reflection

When authors talk about the process of learning to write, it often involves inward focused personal reflection to develop stories that are meaningful to them as writing is usually an individualistic activity. Aadlandsvik says:

> According to van Manen (2005) writing is a solitary experience. When you enter into the space of the text, you go into the darkness...when you gaze into the darkness, it may happen that the night gazes back on you, sometimes giving you glimpses of surprisingly deep insights and beauty, all created by *words* (2007, 670).

This immersion into an imaginary world within the author’s own head is an autonomous experience, although it is always shaped by larger societal processes. An important component of learning to write fiction is that authors must learn to tap into their unique voices as they create stories.

In his discussion of Herbert Marcuse, Brookfield notes that this theorist’s ‘stress on the revolutionary power of detachment and isolation sits uneasily alongside the belief held by many adult educators that learning (particularly critical learning) is inherently social’ (2005, 197). Entering into the imaginary world of fiction may create a sense of estrangement, as

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becoming immersed in art is 'a way of breaking with the rhythms of normal life' (196). Stepping back from the taken-for-granted assumptions that guide us through our everyday existence is one way in which artists can challenge hegemony. Humanistic adult educators allude to this need for self-actualization that can occur when learning taps into authentic spaces within each of us, such as Parker Palmer (2007; c. 1998) talks about in considering the importance of identity and integrity for educators. As stories from the writers in our research indicate, privacy, isolation, and feeling socially set apart, may sometimes create an environment that is conducive to reflective learning.

When an individual experiences a significant amount of solitude, she may find stimulation comes from internal rather than external sources. One Canadian writer, Susanna Kearsley said:

> I was sick a lot as a kid. I'm asthmatic and I was home sick with colds and flues for most of my childhood. I think when you spend a lot of time by yourself like that, it makes little pathways in your brain that makes storytelling one of the things that you do because you're lying there looking at the ceiling a lot of the time. Then I started learning about other writers like me: Robert Louis Stevenson and people that were only children, were off on their own, or were ill a lot. Whatever the reason, I think your brain is wired so that you watch and you notice things maybe that other people don't notice.

In this case, Kearsley suggests that the mental space created by enforced physical inactivity or social isolation may lend some writers the opportunity to develop a mental attentiveness and opportunities for reflection that might not occur if a person is otherwise preoccupied with activities and socially engaged. There is a perceived value in having this time alone to engage in critical reflection.

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Bradley Somers, a literary author who worked as an archeologist out on the oil sands in Alberta explained that when he first began to write:

> At the time it was very remote. The camps were not necessarily the nicest places to be in, so you had your tiny closet-sized room that you could barricade yourself in during the evenings. I did quite a lot of writing in the evenings when I was up there, mainly because there was nothing else to do really. It's kind of this enforced writer-in-residence…the first book I wrote was actually mostly written in the camps.

The mental space afforded by being alone may serve as a stimulant to imagination and critical reflection. Being in a place where there was not a lot of other opportunities to engage socially with others meant that this author could focus on the creative process of writing without other distractions. Similarly, when helping adults learn to write, there can be value in creating spaces such as writing retreats where silence predominates and other distractions are set aside, to help learners to focus inwardly and on their own writing.

Even when one is not physically isolated, this sense of being set apart from others in society, in the role of the observer or outsider, frequently came up in the interviews with fiction writers. Canadian crime fiction author, Louise Penny, offers this observation:

> I always felt ... not because I was a girl or the middle child or anything, it was just part of who I was that I always felt kind of on the outside. And sitting on a lot of literary panels, I've noticed that that is a thread. It's not a constant, not everybody has felt like that. But a lot of authors, I think, have felt excluded, felt on the outside, felt a certain sense of personal isolation.

It may be that this sense of being apart, observing, and reflecting, may then encourage the development of the narrator's voice. The imaginary stories that authors tell are formulated first in the mind, and then put into words to share with others. Taking time to step back from

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others and observe can be an important aspect of learning within the realm of critical reflection. Critical educators such as Brookfield (2012) discuss strategies for teaching critical thinking that involve careful observation and listening to the perspectives of others – a skill that is also enhanced when reading or writing fiction.

At the same time, the themes, topics, characters, and plots that shape the stories that fiction writers craft are often connected in various ways to their unique life experiences. Just as many educators encourage the development of critical reflection by drawing upon personal memories, in many instances individual experiences may serve as a catalyst for fiction writing. As poet/author, Roy Miki, who lived through the internment of Japanese Canadians during World War II explains:

> I grew up in the shadow of the internment process. And that cataclysmic event for my family had a lasting effect on me as a writer and as a thinker…a lot of my writing stems from it, and in part it's the thing that motivated me to write. It's also a history that I've had to negotiate as a limit on my imagination. It has both allowed me to write and it has also challenged me to go beyond it.

As Miki so eloquently explains here, a challenge for many fiction writers is to reflect and draw upon their life experiences to inform their writing, and yet at the same time, to also extend beyond that so it does not become a factor the limits the work that they do. In the same way, adult learners sometimes also need to be nudged to accept this challenge – that whilst personal experience can stimulate critical reflection, it can also sometimes inhibit learning if it becomes a boundary that shapes all interpretation of experience.

Group discussion can sometimes help learners to gain the capacity to reflect critically beyond their own lived experiences. Nicole Markotić, who is poet and fiction writer as well as a creative writing professor explains:

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> I try to explain to my students now, if you can become a good critic, if you can tell what a story needs, then you become a better writer. I didn't understand that then. I think it is what you have to do as a literature critic and what you do as a teacher in critical courses, and what we do when we write about new novels or poetry by other people.

Markotić thus argues that creative writing students learn best through exposure, critique and reflection on the literary fiction of other writers. While this type of critique can occur through individual assessment and reflection, it can also be developed through collective learning experiences such as in writing or literature classes. Similarly, in adult education contexts, having the chance to share disparate viewpoints, critique alternative perspectives, and exchange new ideas, are all ways to foster a richer intersubjective understanding of other's interpretations of experience.

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Critical reflection for social change

In a world characterized by diversity, it is important for both educators and learners to develop an empathetic capacity to envision alternative ways of living and being in the world. Critical educators believe that it is important to create emancipatory adult learning opportunities that may lead to social change. Giroux argues that diverse writers

> challenge the ways in which knowledge is constructed, illuminate the relationship between knowledge and power, and redefine the personal and political so as to rewrite the dialectical connection between what we learn and how we come to learn given our specific location in history, experience, and language (2005, 104).

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His beliefs about the importance of fictional stories to help learners gain insight into our society and the complexities of different power relationships are echoed by many of the authors interviewed in our research.

Canadian literary writer Dawn Bryan also argues that by engaging with literature, readers and writers of fiction are entering into a broader discourse that expose people to different cultural, historical and social contexts. She explains:

> Literature should be in conversation. And if you don't have it, you're only having one kind of conversation and this is a different conversation; one that can exist in time as well. So you can talk to someone writing recently or you can talk to someone writing 200 years ago.

Introducing learners to fiction at all stages across the lifespan can broaden their capacity for critical reflection and help people to understand the complexity and diversity of human experience, as well as challenge them to consider social justice issues such as inequality and prejudice. Canadian children's author Sheree Fitch thinks back on her own early exposure to books:

> When I was thirteen, my dad made a point of giving me two books to read…one of them was *The Diary of Anne Frank* and the other was a book called *Black Like Me* which is a story of a man who was born blind and then gets to see. He sees the world and how much prejudice there is, so he disguises himself as a Black man…I think my dad wanted me to know that I was being in raised in very, very White, middle-class Moncton, New Brunswick, and the world is very big.

In that simple gesture of providing books that offered a wider range of world views, Fitch's father broadened her knowledge base and helped to provide her with a more critical foundation for learning as a writer and as a reader.

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As a former teacher (now a professor) who is also a children's author, Peter Cumming shared his observations of living and working in the Canadian North:

> With cultures in conflict we know some bad things can happen, but I was very interested in cultures in contact, in which there is hybridity. Each culture added to each other's culture without necessarily taking away anything from the other culture. So…when the whalers were there and the…Hudson Bay Boys were there…they became great card players. Cards are very portable. So Inuit women with the different colors of the seal fur and the seal skin kamiik [sealskin boots] have a design with spades, and hearts, and diamonds, and clubs, coming from the cards. From the whalers, the little accordion, the squeezebox and the square dancing that goes with it has become a part of Inuit culture. And similarly frozen porridge, the oatmeal came from the Scots—it turns out that it's great for making the runners of the qamutiik [sleds] slippery. So there are things that don't destroy one's culture, and similarly the Scots who lived there learned many things from the Inuit.

Cumming is not a naïve thinker. In his interview he noted that he saw first-hand some of the problems with violence and substance abuse endemic to Northern Aboriginal communities that may be attributed partially to the legacy of the residential schools whereby Inuit children were taken away from their parents in a process that attempted cultural assimilation. Yet he also thinks that there is value in critically reflecting upon the forms of cultural interchange that can benefit or enrich communities.

Suzette Mayr is a black lesbian Canadian literary writer whose novels deal with the complexities of diversity in contemporary Canadian society in very non-cliché ways. Using biting satire, Mayr's characters are usually very self-absorbed in their everyday worries, and unable or unwilling to reflect on larger social problems. Mayr's literature

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solicits a range of emotions from readers and evokes critical critique of social stereotyping and discrimination. She reflects on her writing:

> It could have to do with being raised in Calgary where often...I was made to understand difference and how I was different…although not all the time, certainly...it represents what Canada is which is we can pretend that it's Tim Hortons and hockey and white people, but that's not what it is, that's not what it has been, you know? There's been waves of immigration and there are also indigenous people who were here long before any of those other immigrants as well. So it seems to me that Canada population-wise, is really interesting and complicated and contradictory. I don't think you can take much for granted, or if you do, it's because you're refusing to see all kinds of realities around you. So I think I'm just trying to reflect what I see and how I understand the world.

Understanding the complexity of different worldviews is where fiction can serve as an important resource for adult educators who work within a social purpose tradition. Pedagogically there may be a number of ways in which the use of fiction reading or writing can stimulate learning in connection to social justice by fostering a deeper, emancipatory form of critical reflection.

Critical reflection can result in a learner's political shift in understanding whereby they begin to challenge hegemonic belief systems that exist within society. Some adult educators hold 'a politicized formulation of critical reflection as the deliberate uncovering and challenging of assumptions concerning power and the perpetuation of hegemony' (Brookfield, 2008, 96). For most people, problematizing personal ideological perspectives is extremely difficult because it is hard to challenge everyday values and norms. Yet in doing so, critically reflective learning may deepen how we think through personal as well as larger

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societal problems. The process of reflection that explores broader social, economic, and cultural issues is perceived to be an important starting point for motivating political change and social action, not just for individual cognitive, emotional, or personal growth.

Using Fiction to Foster Reflective Learning

The processes entailed in critical reflection are frequently evident when looking at learning in connection to fiction reading and writing. Critical reflection in this context involves using the imagination to attain new dispositions, even if albeit temporarily, by actively seeking to engage in a multiplicity of worldviews while involved in literary processes. Fiction compels adult educators and learners to creatively interpret and reflect upon the world as informed by their own experiences and larger societal norms. In these moments, everyday discourses can shift, leading adult educators and learners to defamiliarize previously held assumptions, and perhaps propose new ways to move forward.

In formal education contexts such as in university or professional programs, instructors may choose to use fiction to foster learners' critical and reflective learning capacities. Crawley, Ditzel and Walton (2012) explain how they use picture books in nursing education to encourage students to reflect upon communicating with patients around difficult issues such as death. Turner (2013) discusses how social work students may be encouraged to think more empathetically about potential clients by considering the circumstances of different characters or persons in narrative literature. Adult educator, Darlene Clover asserts that while aesthetic works can speak for themselves and have great pedagogical value, they are even more powerful when 'accompanied by educational processes that deliberately create opportunities for debate and conversations across difference' (2015, 310). For learners and educators who are visible minorities, it is also important to have the opportunity to reflect upon issues of difference, such as those which can be explored within fiction writing.

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African-American scholars Johnson-Bailey and Alfred argue that 'the negotiation between and across cultures is an integral part of the process of learning, critical reflection, and ultimately transformational learning in teaching for black women educators' (2006, 54).

Critically reflective learning is important not only for professional development and workplace learning, but also for personal growth and the development of active and engaged citizens. As Grace points out, a 'neoliberal constriction of learning tends to forget human integrity and our multiple subjectivities' (2013, 35). In a neoliberal context, informal or non-formal learning experiences that involve artistic pursuits such as painting classes, book clubs, or writing groups may often not be perceived to be as valuable or important as more formalized or credentialized educational programs. Perhaps this dismissive attitude in part comes out of a neoliberal emphasis on final product, whereas the kind of deeper, emancipatory critical reflection we are advocating for has a strong focus on critical and creative processes. Yet it is important to realize that these kinds of opportunities may foster learning experiences that generate multiple other benefits. In recent years, there has been a greater attentiveness to the importance of sustaining a sense of well-being in societies (Field, 2009), whereby issues such as mental and physical health, aging, and citizen engagement are taken into consideration. In her study that looked at the learning opportunities afforded by a sketching class offered to a group of older women, Zantingh argues that

> Successful aging is often attributed to being vitally involved and fully engaged in new activities, which can encompass artistic expression. Increased self-awareness and a deeper understanding of others, as well as the permission to experiment and explore new things, all contribute to creative growth (2015, 40).

Artistic endeavours, which may include activities such as writing fiction or poetry, can contribute to valuable learning that may foster critical reflection. Aadlandsvik discusses a Norwegian program that teaches creative writing and poetry to the elderly, where program

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lifelong learning is not 'understood as an instrumental enterprise, but more as an existential one, as an enrichment of life' (2007, 667).

Implications for adult education

Ultimately, there are many ways in which the process of critical reflection in connection to fiction writing can lead to valuable learning experiences. Capturing experience and translating it into words, so that one might be able to understand or gain empathetic insights into another perspective, is a difficult yet motivating factor that shapes people's willingness to write, read, and talk about fiction. Learning in connection to fiction may enhance technical, humanistic, and emancipatory reflective learning experiences.

At the individual level, we can see that fiction reading and writing provides opportunities for personal introspection. Our tendency, as Brookfield (2005) notes, to sometimes be dismissive of the need for quiet, internally focused thought as an integral component of critical adult learning, is challenged by thinking about the silent, independent work involved in reading or writing fiction.

At a social level, fiction reading and writing presents a multitude of possibilities for learning cross-culturally. Adult educator Michael Newman argues that 'critical thinking may take a person's own experience into account but will include much else besides' (1999, 19). Fiction provides the opportunity to situate yourself in someone else's position, albeit temporarily, and it challenges learners to expand their horizons beyond their own personal experiences. Jarvis notes that 'fiction's capacity to promote empathy can be presented as a stage in the development of critical reflection leading people to challenge entrenched social positions' (2012, 749). By connecting at an emotional as well as cognitive level with characters in a story, readers may become more open to diverse perspectives. Within various informal, non-formal, and formal

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learner contexts, adult educators may help to facilitate this process. Using critical pedagogical approaches as Breuing (2011) suggests may provide dialogical opportunities for collaborative reflective learning.

As both the literature and the findings of this study indicate, critical reflection occurs at a number of different levels. Perhaps the most difficult to ascertain is when this kind of learning may lead to social change. Carpenter (2012) discusses the importance of Marxist feminism for adult education to argue that

> Reflection cannot stop at the acknowledgement of shared experience and cannot fast forward to political action. Analysis has to go beyond experience itself and into the social conditions that determine experience and the forms of consciousness we use to interpret our experience (2012, 30-31).

It is essential therefore, that educators consider how this capacity for deeper critical reflection is an important precursor to working towards both individual and societal change. Adult educators need to consider innovative pedagogical strategies to help learners develop these insights. Drawing upon the art of fiction is one way of expanding the 'forms of consciousness' learners might engage with, pushing them beyond their personal experiences and out of their typical comfort zones into nuanced, complex fictional realms where they may explore very real ethical and polemical issues grounded in varied worldviews.

Mark Billingham, a British crime fiction writer notes that his work is primarily designed to tell a story to entertain readers, but at the same time he reflects:

> I became a bit more politicized in college I guess, and it can't not be in your work. It's not like you can shut that part of your brain off when you're writing a story. It seeps into everything you do.

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Habermas (1987) discusses the way in which worldviews create pervasive ways of thinking about normative values so that it becomes difficult to challenge existing power relations and social structures. But if you can teach people to think critically about life, it will 'seep into everything that you do'.

As adult educators we may or may not see the full extent to which learners develop the capacity for critical reflection through our teaching and learning experiences. Students may share a shift in insights through discussion or through the written word, but if actual action follows, it may happen months or years later. Yet we believe that by incorporating pedagogical opportunities where learners can engage with fiction as readers and as writers, we may help to lay the groundwork for our students to develop the capacity to become more critically reflective learners and citizens.

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